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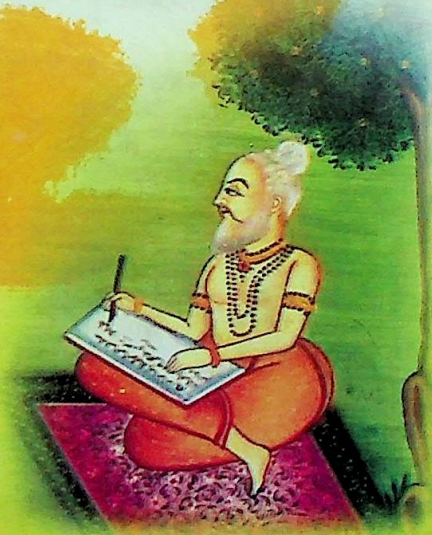
BAAL RAMAYANA

Riddhi Parashar



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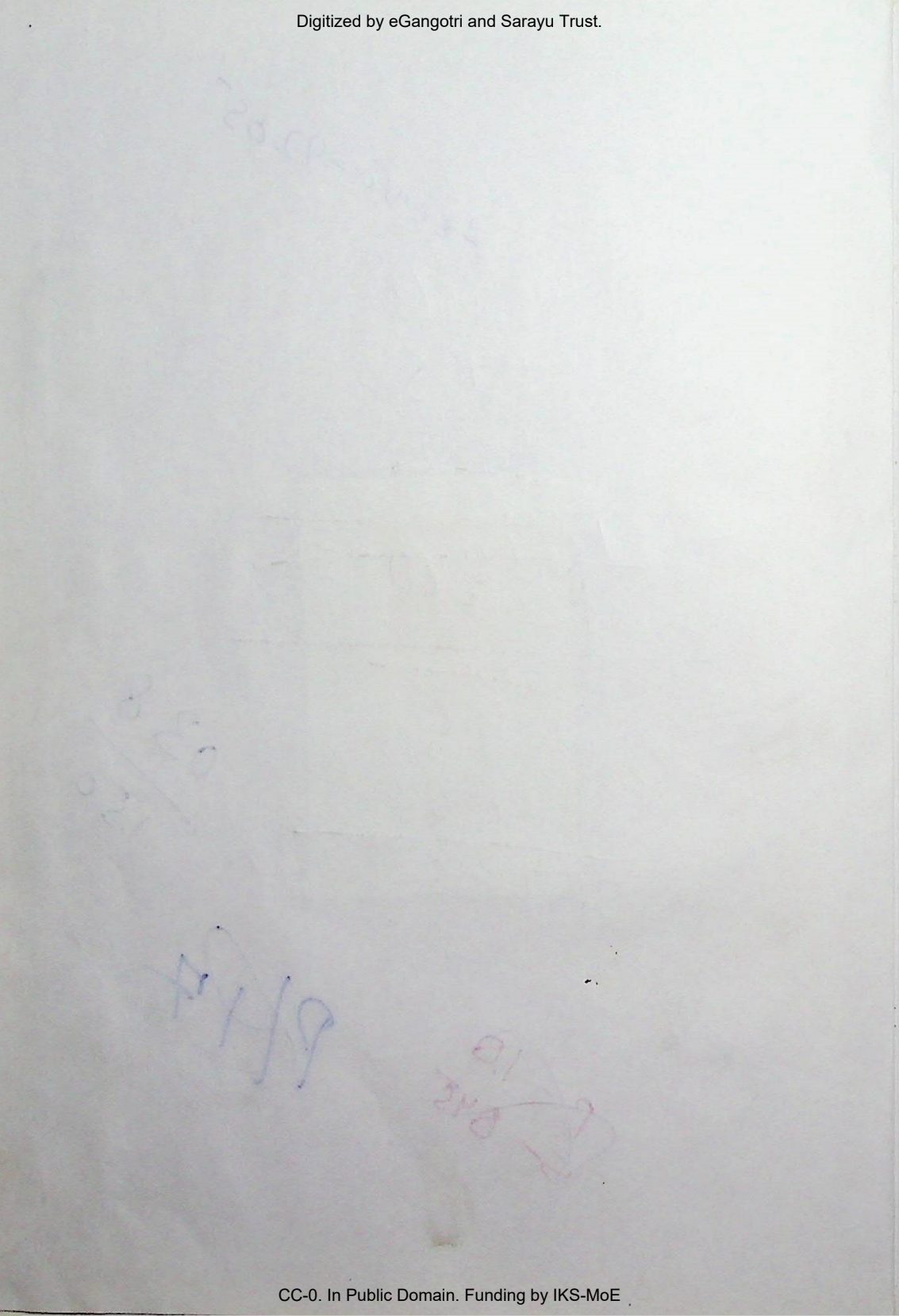

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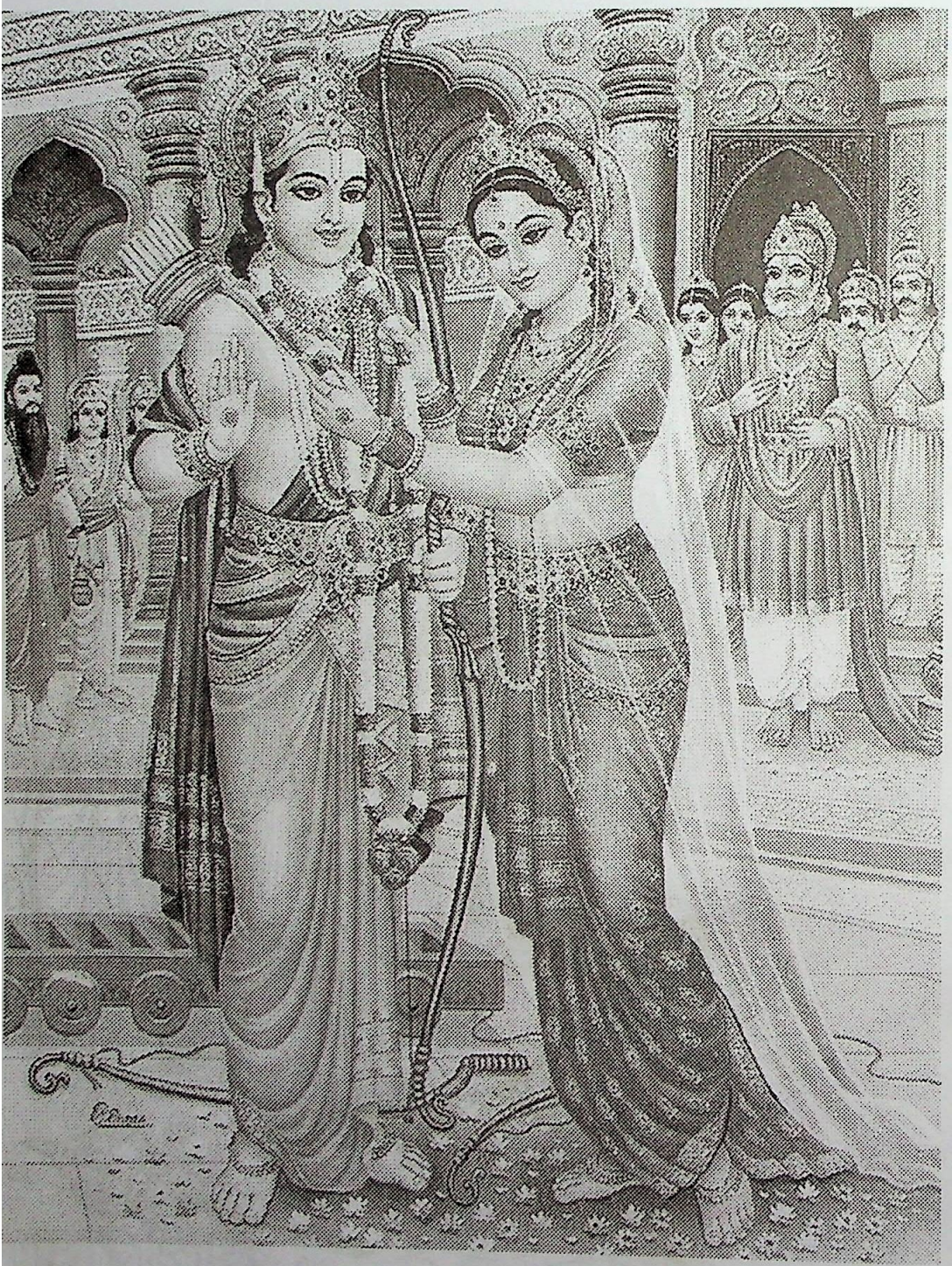

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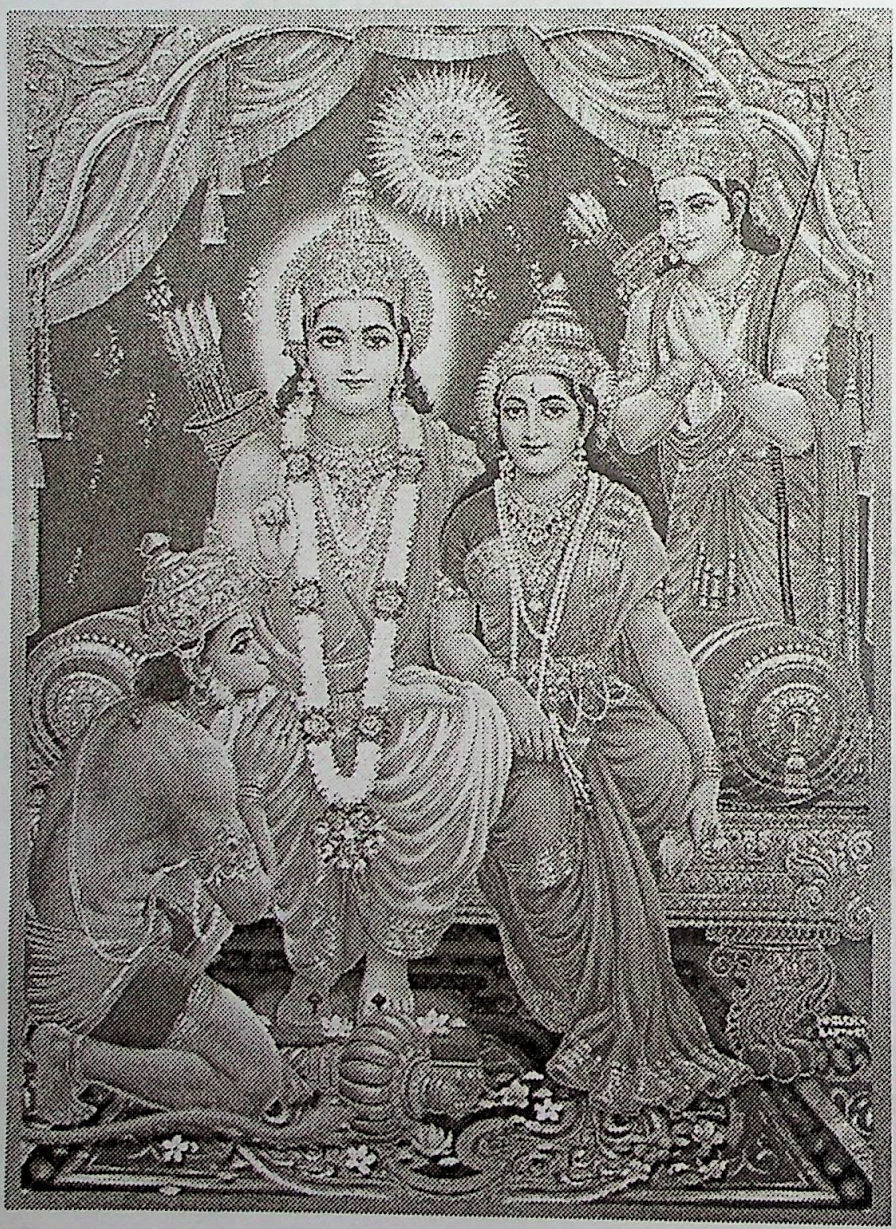

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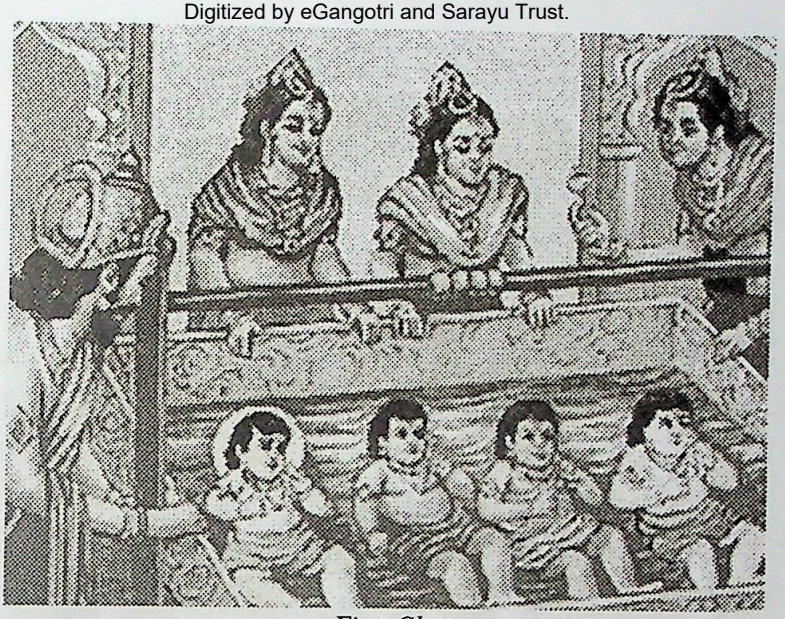

First Chapter

BAAL KANDA

•

Childhood Hood

Rama is incarnation of God. He is Superman Supreme. The gods and angels prayed to Lord Vishnu and Rama took birth in Ayodhya in answer to those prayers. He looks just like another boy but he has divine qualities. He went to the forests with Vishwamitra and vanquished demons like Tadka and Subahu. Rama accompanied the sage to Janakpuri. He salvaged Ahalya on his way who had turned into a stone due to a curse put on her by her husband. In Janakpuri, Rama broke the Shiv-Bow and won the hand of Sita, the daughter of the king Janak. His younger brothers, Laxmana, Bharata and Shatrughana also got married to the younger sisters of Sita. Entire Ayodhya got into celebration mood at such happy tidings, the pointers to the glorious future.

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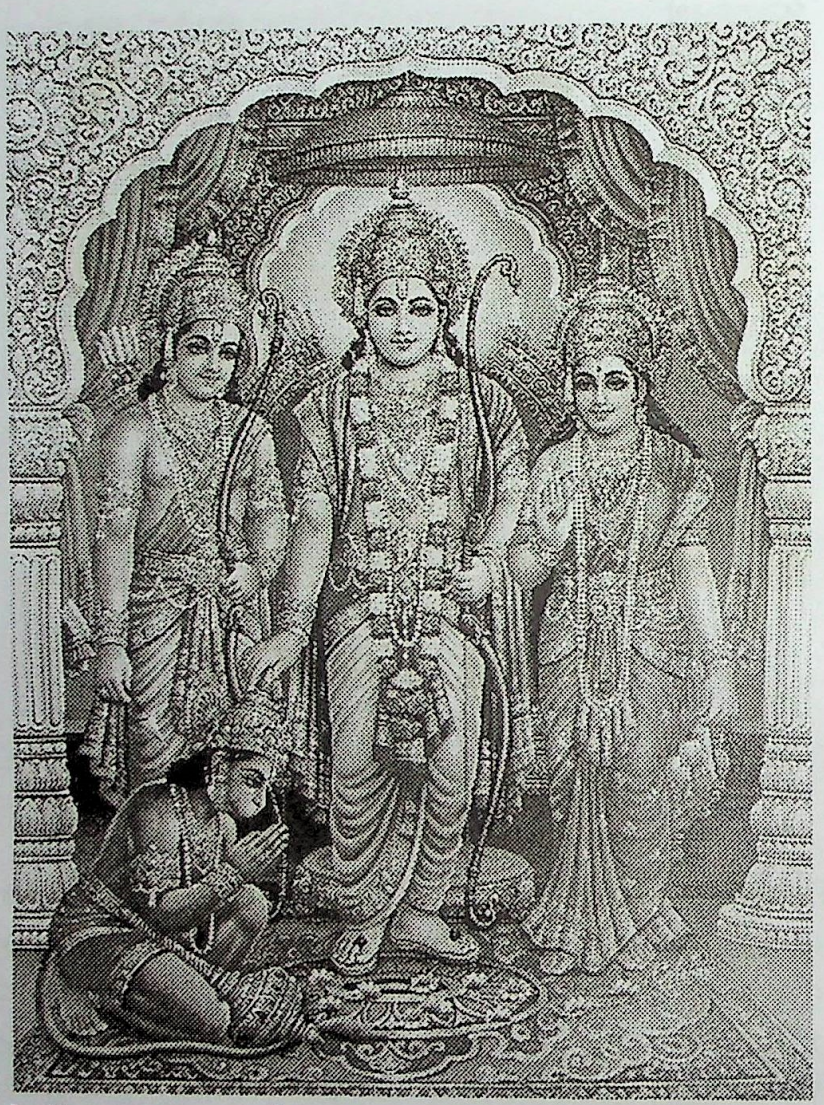

Aado Ramtapowanadhigamnam Hatwa Mirgam Kanchanam
Vaidehi Harnam Iatayumarnam Sugreev Sambhasnam
Bali Nairdalanam Samudratarnam Lankapuri Dahnam
Pashchadravan Kumbhkarna Hananam Etaddhi Ramayanam

Rama's going to the wilds, hunting the golden deer, abduction of Sita, death of Jatayu, alliance with Sugreeva, killing of Bali, crossing the sea, putting Lanka on fire and slaying of Ravana and Kumbhakarna, that is all what makes Ramayana.

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King Dashratha

There was a magnificient city in ancient India—Ayodhya.

The city was founded on the bank of the river Saryu by Ikshavaku, the eldest son of Manu. Manu, the first one of the Sun dynasty of the sun worshippers. The Sun dynasty produced several great kings, the truthful Harish Chandra, Sagar, Bhagirath, Dillip and Raghu, to name a few. Their tales of glorious deeds have become legends of our history. The king Dashratha was the grandson of the king Raghu who earned such fame that his descendents preferred to call themselves Raghuvanshis (The members of Raghu dynasty). Thus, Sun dynasty became Raghuvansh. King Dashratha was valiant, learned, religious and generous.

He had three queens—Kaushalya, Kaikayee and Sumitra. All the three were paragons of beauty, piety and righteousness.

Like his ancestors, king Dashratha too was a Sun worshipper who began his day after paying obeisance to Sun god. The capital city, Ayodhya was prosperous and the citizens were happy. But the face of the king did not reflect this happiness. He looked to be in an agony. The reason was that inspite of having three queens he had not become a father. The queens were issueless. The worry for a heir always pained him. He used to wonder, "How shall I redeem myself from the guilt of being unable to sire a son or a daughter?"

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One day, when he was worshipping Sun along with his family guru Vashishta, the agony of his heart found words, "O Guru, please give me relief from this worry."

"What Worry, O King?"

"For years I have been dying to see the face of my child. And still I go on dying. Shall I really die without becoming a father? Is the reign of the Sun dynasty about to come to an end on Ayodhya?" The king said in a choked voice.

"Don't lose your heart, O King. God is merciful. You shall get a son with the blessing of Sun god," the guru assured the King.

"When shall it happen, O Guru? When that good day will come?" The king Dashrath spoke in anguish and sighed, "And I am getting older."

"King! There is a way. You must perform Putreshti Yajna which can grant you a son," the guru suggested.

"Then, help me do it, please. Why delay?" the king said anxiously.

"King! Only the sage Shringi is competent to do it. Go to his place and bring him with due respect if he agrees to your request."

"As you wish", the king said bowing his head, "I will proceed right away."

And the king Dashrath walked on bare feet to the *ashram* of the sage Shringi. There, he paid obeisance to the sage by touching his feet with devotion and appealed to perform the Yajna for him.

The sage Shringi accepted the king's request and accompanied him to Ayodhya to perform the Yajna.

The news of the arrangement of Yajna spread throughout the city. The citizens prayed to God to make their King a

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blessed father and enthusiastically took part in the Yajna.

As the Yajna reached the final stage, divine figure of Agnidev, the god of fire, appeared out of the Yajna flames. He was holding a bowl of *Kheer* (a sweet dish of rice cooked in milk) in his hands. He spoke, "O King, your wish is granted. Give this *Kheer* to your queens to eat. The grace of the Almightly will bless you with what you wish."

The divine figure faded away as soon as the king received the bowl of *Kheer*. The king Dashratha was beyond joy at the success of the Yajna. He gratefully gave generous sum as guru-fee to sage Shringi, besides a number of precious gifts for his service and saw the sage off. After that, with due permission of the guru Vashisht, the king Dashratha went to his palace with the bowl of *Kheer*.

In the palace, he summoned the queens. That brought the queens Kaushalya and Kaikayee to his presence in quick time. Due to some reason the third queen, Sumitra could not come at that time. The king was brimming with joy and could not wait to feed the divine *Kheer* to his queens. He just wanted to see the queens finish their shares of *Kheer* and make the divine blessing come true without delay. He gave two portions to Kaushalya and Kaikayee and urged, "Darlings, take the divine *Kheer* at once."

The queens knew about the Putreshti Yajna and the gifting of the *Kheer* by the god of fire. Then, they suddenly remembered about Sumitra who was not there. The queens kindly took out halves from their shares for her and ate the rest. Soon after, Sumitra reached there and partook both the saved portions.

In due course of time, by virtue of the divine *Kheer*, all the three queens became pregnant. The news gladdened

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the king Dashratha to no-end. Now, all his worries and doubts blew away.

Birth of Rama , Lakshman, Bharat, Shatrughan

After a long, anxious wait, the time of the birth of the babies arrived, filling the king Dashratha's stomach with butterflies. The eldest queen, Kaushalya was the first to give birth to a son, at afternoon, on the day nine of the month Chaitra of the Indian calender.

The queen Kaikayee followed with a son and Sumitra bore two sons. The arrival of four princely babies sent the kings into ecstacy. He was overwhelmed. The maid who gave him the news got the king's royal neckmce of pearls as a reward. The trusted minister Sumant was ordered to shower the city with surprise gifts and sweetmeats for all the citizens. The news of the birth of the princes delighted everyone across the kingdom. The palace and the royal court echoed with the music of celebrations.

The loud wails of new born royal babies excited the maids and servants of the palace so much that they ran around in a daze of joy, madly congratulating one another. The housewives of the kingdom rushed out of their homes and started singing in groups, the traditional songs welcoming the births and expressing happiness.

The men showed their excitement by sprinkling colours and scents on one another. They hugged and embraced even the strangers.

The city was bedecked as a bride. Festoons and buntings shimmered all over. The lamps lighted up the streets and houses. An express chariot was despatched to bring the

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family guru Vashishta. He arrived with a group of Brahmins to a great welcome by the King. The guru wanted the sage Shringi to be invited too. The king happily complied. Then, king Dashratha performed all the rites as prescribed by the holy books and traditions, for a man, on becoming the father. The Brahmins were generously given gifts at the end of the rites and rituals.

The celebrations continued for a full month as everyone rejoiced to the heart's content throughout the kingdom.

At the end of the month, the auspicious occasion of christening ceremony arrived. The king requested the family guru to personally perform all the rites. The guru organised Yajna and after making astrological calculations, declared, "O King, your eldest son, born to the queen Kaushalya, who has all the signs of being the incarnation of all Merciful God, shall be known as 'Rama'. Your second son, born to the queen Kaikayee, born under the stars which can make him provider of all, shall be called 'Bharata'. The elder son of queen Sumitra, who is embodiment of all noble qualities and valour, gets the name 'Laxmana'. And his younger brother, who will be the scourge of the enemies, shall be known by the name 'Shatrughana'. O fortunate King, all four of your sons are in the image of the gods, the blessings for all the humans and dear to all divine powers."

Thus, the christening ceremony was completed. The four princes began the journey of life under the care of parental love and royal privileges. Their progress delighted everyone.

The mothers and the father are all joy at seeing slightly dark complexioned Rama, a picture of beauty and charm, toddle around jingling the royal bracelets and laces, he wears. The queen Kaikayee is a bit partial to little Rama in pouring

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her motherly love. She is very fond of giving him a bath with her own hands and tidying up. One day, she puts gold anklets with little bells on the little feet of Rama and helps him take steps around. It makes sweet musical twinkling sounds which delights the father and the other mothers endlessly. The queens Kaushalya and Sumitra too take turns in walking Rama around. The king Dashratha sheds the tears of joy when little Rama jumps into his lap to escape from the fondling mothers.

The frolicks and the pranks of Rama become talk of the town, making everyone happy and agog besides, giving joy to the parents. The other princes too add their shares of antics to this free for all joy and happiness.

One day, Kaushalya bathed her son and put him in the swing bed after combing his hair. Then, she went to her private temple to worship the deity. After the worship, she placed the offering of sweets before the idol of the deity and went to the kitchen for something. When she came back to the temple, she found little Rama eating the sweets. It greatly surprised her.

A little frightened and confused, she raced to the chamber where Rama had been put to sleep in the swing bed. She found him peacefully asleep. When she returned to the temple, little Rama was there too, eating the sweets with relish. The queen Kaushalya was shocked. She thought that she was losing her head or was seeing imaginary things. Watching her in confused state, little Rama smiled. He revealed his divine image to his mother. The image reflected mountains, rivers, forests, all creatures, earths, moons, suns, stars, constellations, galaxies, universe, times, speeds, spaces, forces, dimensions and cosmic infinity.

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The queen watched her son with awe as her body trembled. She found no words to say. All she could do was to fall at the feet of Rama, overwhelmed with devotional emotions.

Finding the mother in such confusion, the image shrank into little Rama. Kaushalya was still in great fright as the truth sank into her that she had born the incarnation of God, Rama spoke to her to put her at ease and made her promise that she would not reveal their secret to anyone. Kaushalya had prayer on her lips as she gave her word.

Thus, playing pranks, naughty games and little miracles, the princes grew out of infancy.

At proper stage, the king Dashratha invited the family guru, sage Vashishta and requested him to perform thread ceremony (Janeoo) to initiate the princes into the religion. The guru Vashishta performed the ceremony with all the procedures carefully followed.

A little more time passed. The princes now took to arrow shooting in the garden. The fruits used to be their targets. The brothers were a inseparable team. The younger brothers paid due respect to Rama. Laxmana was particularly devoted to his eldest brother, Rama.

Education At Guru Vashishtha Ashram

One day, as the king Dashratha watched his sons shoot arrows in the garden below, he realised that the time had come when the princes must get proper education. He summoned the minister Sumanta and asked him to leave the princes at the ashram of guru Vashishta for formal schooling and learning. After receiving the orders of the King, the minister Sumanta contacted the princes and

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conveyed to them the wish of their father. Rama said, "Sir, we shall humbly obey the orders of our respected father."

"So, please obtain the permission of the queen mothers right away. We shall depart early in the morning tomorrow," with these instructions, the minister took leave of them.

In the evening, the princes approached the queen mothers and informed them of the King's wish. They sought the permission of the mothers to go. The very thought of the separation from their dear sons shocked the queen mothers. It was as painful as letting someone take out their hearts from their bodies. But there was no alternative. Because it was the demand of the future of their sons and the tradition of the royal family. They had to bear with the agony of the separation as their duty.

The next morning, the mothers and the father, blessed the princes with heavy heart and let them go with Sumanta. The princes had taken off their princely clothes and other things. They departed in common man's brief dresses. At the ashram, guru Vashishta recited the rules and regulations of his school to the princes and admitted them.

The prince brothers, started living at the ashram and got busy in learning. In a short time, they became thorough in the knowledge of holy books and the books of general wisdom. The guru was very pleased with the speed with which his royal wards were progressing in every subject. He imparted to them the knowledge of religion, state craft, moral values, politics, philosophy, administration and social matters. The princes passed the final tests with flying colours.

Guru Vashishta sent a message to the King announcing the completion of the theoretical education of the princes. He suggested that they be called back and given practical

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training in warfare and the use of arms by expert teachers.

The message delighted the king Dashratha and the queen mothers who became very excited by the thought of greeting their accomplished sons. The King at once spoke to the trusted minister, "Dear Sumanta, we have got the message from the guru, saying that the princes have completed their education. He wants the princes to get the practical training in arms now. We have to get them back. So, please take the express chariot and bring them back. I and their mothers can hardly wait to see them."

"As you wish, O King", so saying Sumanta started to leave when the King added, "And yes, we would like to see them in princely dresses."

"I will take their clothings and adornments along, sir."

Sumanta collected the royal dresses and regalia from the queens and set off on the chariot to guru Vashishta's *ashram*.

Once there, Sumanta paid obeisance to the guru Vashishta and explained the purpose of his visit. The guru, at once summoned the princes and spoke to them, "Rama! Laxmana, Bharata and Shatrughana! As you have successfully completed your theoretical education here, the minister Sumanta has come to escort you back to your parents. Put on the royal clothes and prepare to leave."

"As you order, O Guru Sir," the four brothers bow their heads in respect. They took their regalia and retreated to their hut.

Meanwhile, guru Vashishta listened to the minister Sumanta talk of the happenings in the palace and the city.

When the brothers reappeared in the princely attires, the place glittered with their beauty and radiance. The

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minister Sumanta looked stunned.

The princes bent down and touched the feet of their guru. Guru Vashishta picked them up lovingly and patted their heads with extreme pride, "Go sons! Use the knowledge you learned here to destroy the darkness and the ignorance of the world. Spread the light. Take care of your parents and elders. Give happiness to all people through service and kindness. That is my last lesson and the blessing."

"We will always obey your wishes, O Respected Guru," The four spoke in one voice.

"God bless you, sons."

And the four prince brothers once again touched the feet of their guru respectfully, embraced all the other fellow students and took leave of them all.

The chariot moved with the princes as the students of the ashram stood with folded hands and tears in their eyes.

Return in Ayodhya

The excitement ran high as the citizens of Ayodhya saw the chariot carrying the princes coming into view. A huge crowd had flooded towards the main entrance of the city. The people were jostling and pushing one another to stay close to the road to have a closer look at their beloved princes. Some of them were playing bugles or blowing conchshells. A few groups were beating tomtoms and cymbals. The city had been decorated by efforts of the citizens and the royal servants.

As soon as the chariot entered through the gate, the people stood dazed by the glamour of the princes. They had not imagined their princes to grow up into the youth of such glorious beauty. When the spell broke, the people hailed the princes at the top of their throats.

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Whichever road the chariot took, the princes were beseized by admirers. The old women blessed them, the young women worshipped them and the menfolk raised welcome slogans.

The mother queens waited with baited breaths at the gate of the royal palace for the chariot to arrive. They were beaming with anticipation.

At another gate, the King stood anxiously along with his ministers, chieftans and honourable citizens.

At last, the chariot arrived to everyone's joy and great relief. The princes alighted and Rama bowed before the king Dashratiia to say, "Respected father! Your son, Rama seeks the blessings of you."

"Rama! My son," the King stepped forward overwhelmed with emotions. He embraced Rama and held him tight to his chest for quite some time. Then, the other princes followed according to seniority to repeat the same ritual.

Tears had welled up in the eyes of the King. Suddenly he remembered and realised how the queens must be dying to see their darling sons. He advised, "Dear sons! Go and meet your mothers. Their eagerness to meet you cannot be put in words. Don't keep them waiting."

"As you order, father," the sons said and moved towards the ladies gate of the palace.

Rama greeted the mother Kaikayee first.

"Rama! My son!" squealed the queen and hugged him, mother Kaushalya took Laxman and Shatrughana in her arms while Sumitra embraced Bharata. Every eye present there became wet at witnessing this emotional reunion of mothers and sons. And every pair of lips was aglow with a sweet smile.

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Then, the sons greeted their own mothers and touched their feet, After that the mothers performed traditional worship of the sons and escorted them in.

The palace and the city stayed awake all night, too excited to sleep. In the morning, the King gave alms generously to the *Brahmins* and the needy.

The next day, the King summoned the princes to the court and heard about their experiences at the Guru's *ashram*. The princes were told that after the academic education, it was the turn to learn the art of the use of the arms. The princess bowed their heads in abeyance. Four expert teachers were appointed to train the princes in arms and warfare. Only a few month's training turned the princes into fierce warriors. Valour and battle worthiness was in their blood.

Now the princes began attending the court and assisting the ministers in various administrative tasks.

The citizen had grown very fond of the princes. The people eagerly waited in the streets which led to the palaces to get a glimpse of their heroes. The sight of Rama especially delighted the crowds who adored him.

Rama often went to hunt in the jungle along with his friends or brothers. His arrows never killed fawns or doe with babies.

It was believed that the creatures killed by him went to heaven.

The skill of the brothers in archery gave a great feeling of security to the citizens. Inspite of the accomplishments at such young age, Rama always showed due respect to the parents, ministers and elders.

This delighted the royal family and the subjects alike.

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Sage Vishwamitra

For a period, the people of Ayodhya and the royal family lived in a peaceful bliss. The presence of the princes of great education, character and skills of the highest order and their divine origins assured everyone that the future was safe and bright. But this spell of peace was not to last forever.

It ended the day sage Vishwamitra arrived at the court of the king Dashratha. The King and the Guru of the royal family and the court sage Vashishta greeted the famed sage Vishwamitra and he was ushered in with due respect. After seating the guest, the king Dashratha said," O Sage! what a pleasant surprise! Fourtunate is our court and this city where your holy feet landed today. Please say, why have you honoured us with your visit?"

"King! the demons are making our life difficult. They desecrate our Yajnas. Whenever a Yajna is in the crucial stage, the demons defile the holy fire. You must defend us and protect our Yajnas," the visiting sage revealed the purpose of his visit.

King Dashratha assured the sage, "O Great Sage! You need not worry. We shall send an unit of our soldiers that will destroy the demons."

"No King. These demons are very powerful, cunning and they know the black sorcery of evil forces. Your soldiers are no match for them. You shall merely lose your soldiers."

"So, what is the solution?" the King wanted to know," Do you want us to come along?"

"No! You need not bother. Just send your sons Rama and Laxmana with me."

The King lost his colour and his heart skipped a few beats. He spoke mutely, "What are you saying, O Sage? My

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children are too tender and inexperienced to face those horrible demons! When you think the well-trained soldiers can't tackle them....how can two boys?"

These words of the King annoyed the fiery sage Vishwamitra who at once got up in anger and said," King! If you can't accept my proposal, say it clearly. Don't make lame excuses!

And he moved towards the door hautily saying, "We are going, King! Today we learn that the sages are turned back empty handed from the court of the kings of so called great Sun dynasty."

At this point, guru Vashishta intervened by stopping sage Vishwamitra by apologizing and by begging him to take his seat again. He spoke, "O Great Sage! Please do not act in such haste. You won't leave empty handed, I assure you."

Then, Vashishta counselled to the King. "O King Dashratha! Don't let the love for sons make you a weakling and earn a bad name. Let Rama and Laxmana go with sage Vishwamitra. They must show us what they have learnt and what material they are made of. All the young men have to go through the fire test of life. Education must be put to practice."

Wise counsel prevailed and Dashratha realised his mistake. He turned over Rama and Laxmana to sage Viswamitra and said, "Forgive me, O Sage! My sons are your servants. Please take them and do whatever you wish."

Thus, sage Vishwamitra departed with Rama and Laxmana.

Tadka And Subahu

Sage Vishwamitra was walking through the forest with the princes and telling them how the demons were troubling

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the sages, ascetics, rishis and *munis*. Suddenly, a voice thundered in the air like the rumbling of the clouds. And lo! A mountain like she-demon blocked their path. She taunted the sage, "So, you bring these kids for your defence, huh? What a joke! I will eat them like bananas!"

As the she-demon pounced at Rama and Laxmana, the sage Vishwamitra warned, "Watch out, Rama! It is the same Tadka I told you about. And this is her area."

Rama was already alert. Before she could grab him, an arrow from his bow felled her in a trice.

The valour and ferocity with which Rama felled the she-demon Tadka pleased sage Vishwamitra. He remarked, "Choosing You and Laxmana was no mistake."

At his *ashram*, the sage gave the princes divine weapons.

After receiving the divine weapons, Rama said, "Lord, you can perform Yajna without any fear. We two brothers will stand guard to defend it."

Sage Vishwamitra blessed them and got busy with other sages in the preparations for the Yajna.

The news of the death of Tadka drove the demons, Sabhahu and Mareech utterly mad with anger. They rushed to the Yajna spot to teach a lesson to the sages. Some other demons also accompanied them.

The Yajna had commenced.

The demons tried to desecrate the Yajna by throwing bones, chunks of meat and other petty things into the holy fire pit and on the Yajna stage.

Seeing this, Rama shot an arrow which whirled over the Yajna place to work as an umbrella. All the objects being thrown by the demons got hit away or spun away. It upset the demons. They ran around the place to find a new way of

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spoiling the Yajna. They failed inspite of several attempts.

The Yajna was to be completed on the sixth day. For five days the demons tried again and again but could not succeed. On the sixth day, they targeted the sages with filth and weapons.

Rama and Laxmana were keeping a watch from the outer boundary of the *ashram* as they did on the other days.

When Rama saw the demons attempting to do physical harm to the holy men, he lost his cool and said to Laxmana, "Brother! I think the demons are coming back again and again asking for the death. We can't disappoint them."

"Just give me your order, brother! I will send them to the hell," so saying Laxmana put his arrow on the bow.

"Right. You take Subahu and I will see Mareech", Rama said and prepared to shoot.

Laxmana's arrow found Subahu and brought him down dead like a stone. Rama's divine arrow despatched Mareech a hundred miles away into the sea, making him roar in pain.

On the sixth day, the Yajna was successfully completed. All the holy men thanked Rama and Laxmana from the cores of their hearts.

Salvation of Ahalya

After the Yajna, sages and the other holy men lived peacefully with no danger of demons. One day, sage Vishwamitra got a letter from the king Janaka in which he had invited the sage to attend the Swayamwara (The groom selection ceremony) of his daughter Sita. The sage informed the princes," Rama, the king of Mithila's Janak has invited me to the Swayamwara of his daughter! I want

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you two to come along. It should prove good outing and sight seeing."

The princes said with folded hands, "As your Lord wishes."

The next day, all three set out for Mithila.

On the way, Rama and Laxmana saw a deserted hut outside which lay a human figure of stone. It surprised the brothers. Rama enquired, "Lord, whose hut is it and what is that stone figure?"

Sage Vishwamitra revealed, "Son, the hut belonged to sage Gautam and the stone is his wife, Ahalya on whom her husband put this curse."

Then he narrated the full story, "Sage Gautam's wife Ahalya was a woman of great beauty. Once, Lord Indra saw her and fell in love. He played a dirty trick to satisfy his lust for her. Indra transformed himself into duplicate Gautam and slept with Ahalya who got fooled. In the morning, just when Indra was leaving, sage Gautam arrived after a night meditation. He suspected his wife of having a lover. Indra escaped but Ahalya paid the price. Gautam put a curse and turned her into stone. The curse will be lifted if you touch the stone with your feet, Rama. Go ahead and salvage her, my son."

Rama did as he was asked to do. As soon as he put his foot on the stone, it turned into the live human form of Ahalya. She was overwhelmed at finding Rama standing infront of her. She prayed, "I am blessed to receive the dust of your feet, O Lord. I am a fallen soul and I seek your mercy. Grant me full salvation."

Rama spoke, "Go lady. Go to your husband in the heaven."

Ahalya flashed towards heavens, fully salvaged. Sage Vishwamitra moved ahead with his wards.

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Sita Swayamwara

In Mithilapuri, Vishwamitra and the princes stayed in a small garden house. The servants of the house informed the king Janaka about the arrival of sage Vishwamitra along with two handsome princes. This brought the king Janaka to the garden house where he formally greeted the sage and touched his feet.

The grace of Rama and Laxmana stunned Janaka. He had never seen so desirable princes in his life anywhere. He was anxious to know about them.

Pleased at the king's heartening welcome the sage blessed him and then Rama and Laxmana were introduced. In Swayamwara the king arranged them to be seated at a vantage point.

A gathering of kings and princes graced the Swayamwara. The demons and devas were also present in the guise of the kings. At the venue, on the centre stage, the legendary bow of Lord Shiva was placed unstringed.

At appointed hour, Sita reached the venue decked up as bride accompanied by her friends and the royal maids who were singing auspicious songs. Sita's beauty had dazzled everyone.

The king Janaka signalled to his minister to announce the terms of the Swayamwara to all the contestents.

The minister addressed the assembled kings and the princes, "The Honourable Kings and the Respected Princes, this bow of Lord Shiva is very heavy and difficult to bend. It is the vow of the king Janaka of Mithila that any mighty King or Prince who lifts it and successfully strings the bow, will get the hand of the princess Sita in marriage, with the consent of the King."

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(Unstringed bow is merely an almost straight piece of stick, ft requires to be bent with force and the free end of the string is then tied or hooked on the other end of the stick to make it a bow which is called 'stringing'.)

The announcement made the kings smile because on looks, the task appeared easy. Everyone was confident of doing it.

For sometime, no one came forward because every king wanted some other one to start the process. Then, a king of the southern region rose up and approached the bow and put his fingers around the middle of the bow. He gave a jerk to lift it. But the bow didn't move even a bit. Use of more powerful pull also failed. He tried it using both the hands but the Bow stayed where it was as if fixed to the ground.

This was a cause of worry for other hopeful kings and princes. Now they knew that the challenge was not that easy to meet because the failed king looked quite powerful.

The others also tried one by one but failed and sat down on their seats with heads bent down in shame.

An eerie silence fall down on the assembly. Sita and her friends appeared dejected. The king Janaka and his queen looked at each other greatly worried. At last, the king Janaka rose up from his throne like a sick man and spoke in a pained voice, "I would not have put Shiva-Bow condition had I known that this earth no more produces men of power and strength. Kings and princes, please go home and rest in your holes. My daughter Sita would now remain virgin as a shame to the manhood."

The kings and the princes kept their heads hung down and listened silently. But Laxmana was feeling the rush of blood.

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"What a tragedy, O God!" with this lament the king Janaka collapsed on his seat.

"That's enough, O King!" Laxmana thundered.

He touched the feet of Vishwamitra and Rama and turned to declare, "No one must dare to speak such insulting words where any man from Sun dynasty sits. If my respected brother Rama allows me, I will run to hundreds of Yojana (Yojana was a measurement unit in ancient times.) distances carrying this old Shiva-Bow or break it like a twig. I might even lift this earth like a ball and toss it to another world."

The ground trembled and the air exploded when the hot words of Laxmana echoed through it.

Rama quietend his younger brother.

Sage Vishwamitra mysteriously smiled and spoke to Rama, "Son! Rise and string the Shiva-Bow to comfort the dear king Janaka."

"As you order, Lord", Rama rose up and bended to touch the feet of sage Vishwamitra to seek blessing.

Then, he gracefully walked up to the Shiva-Bow.

The kings looked incredulously. They thought, "how can this tender and slender prince do that?"

Rama closed his eyes and mentally apologized to Lord Shiva. Then, he picked up the bow in one effortless move. But as he tried to bend the bow to look the string, the old bow snapped in two.

The breaking of the bow sounded like an explosion does and created shock waves which raced out like expanding cyclones to sweep the earth. Laxmana looked at his brother with overwhelming pride. And Rama stood nonchalantly with a sweet smile on his lips and the half piece of broken bow in his hand.

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When the commotion calmed down, the Swayamwara venue suddenly came alive with happy sounds of drums, clarions, tomtoms, horns and shehnai to celebrate the triumph. The women started singing merrily. The king Janaka and his queen shed tears of joy. Then, Janaka happily walked up to Rama, "Dear Rama, you saved the honour of my vow. I was in hopeless state," the grateful king Janaka said with folded hands.

Just then, Sita arrived there with her friends. She garlanded Rama with *jaimala* after seeking the due permission of her father.

The garlanding started wild celebrations all around. The gods showered flowers from the heaven. The groups of merry tribals of the divine origin, namely, Yaksha, Kinners and Gandharvas danced with joy.

The pair of Rama and Sita looked too beautiful for words. Everyone was staring at them stunned.

And then....!

Parshurama-Laxmana Samvad

The breaking of Shiva-Bow brought warrior sage Parshurama, the stormy petrel of Bhrigu dynasty, storming into the Swayamwara venue in great rage. His fiery appearance silenced everyone.

The king Janak paid obeisance to him. Sage Vishwamitra asked Rama and Laxmana to pay respect to the warrior-sage by touching his feet. After the formality of blessing, Parshurama barked at Janak, "O foolish king! Who broke the holy Shiva-Bow? Get him before me or I will chop your kingdom into cow fodder! Do you understand?"

The king Janaka turned dumb and pale with fear.

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Sita stood like a frightened doe.

This forced Rama to say something to cool down Parshurama, "O Lord! whoever broke the bow is your humble servant. Please give me your command."

"Servant is for serving. Listen Rama! Whoever broke this Shiva-Bow is my enemy. I won't allow him to stay alive. Either he comes forward or I will kill all the kings assembled here!" so declaring he rattled his battle axe.

The kings and the princes turned pale with fear.

But Laxmana looked amused.

The harsh words of Parshurama brought taunting reaction from Laxmana, "O Sage-o-Axe, sir, in our childhood we broke many such bowlets. Then you didn't get angry. So, why this concern for that old moth eaten and worn out bowlet?"

"Foul mouth kid! You don't know how to talk! Calling the mightly Shiva-Bow a bowlet? The cheeck! See my battle axe? It has slain the Kshatriya warriors to clean this world twenty one times!"

Laxmana laughed, "Your hot talk and the funny axe does not impress me. I am no watermelon to be cut by it. I do not show anger because, as a principle, we do not harm *Brahmins*, faithfuls, gods and cows."

When Rama saw that the argument was going out of hand, he stepped forward to stand between the quarrelling parties.

He said to Parshurama, "O Lord! Please forgive this ignorant child. I am the one who is your culprit, Your humble servant, Rama. A lord and his servant can't be enemies, sir!"

The humility of Rama surprised the angry sage. He got

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thinking. He had heard that Lord Vishnu had taken incarnation as a son of the king Dashratha of Ayodhya. Parshurama wanted to get convinced. So, he handed his own Shiva-Bow to Rama and challenged," If you are the one who has broken that Bow, then you can string this one too. Show me."

Rama easily did it.

Not only he stringed it but put an arrow to the string too and announced, "O Sage, you know that this arrow does not waste itself. Once invoked it must do some damage to something. It will destroy all the credit of your penance and your transcendental power."

Parshurama had no doubts about the true identity of Rama.

He prayed, "O Rama! don't destroy my power to transcend. Just destroy the credit of my penance." Rama accepted his request and let him transcend into Mahendra mountains.

All the kings beared a sigh of relief as soon as Parshurama disappeared from there. The king Janak said to Vishwamitra, "O Sage, please advise, how do we arrange the wedding?"

Sage Vishwamitra suggested, "O King! I think you should send a messenger to Ayodhya with a request for the king Dashratha to arrive in Mithila with the marriage party of his side."

The messenger was despatched without any delay.

Rama-Sita Wedding Ceremony

When the messenger from Mithila gave the king Dashratha the invitation for the marriage of Rama from the king of Mithila Janaka, his joy knew no bounds. The exciting news was at once relayed to the queens. The messenger was put

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up in the royal guest house. The King sent one of his trusted men to fetch the family guru, sage Vashishta.

The news brought Bharata and Shatrughana running to their father, the King. The excitement was catching up. Soon, it was all over the palace and a little later, the whole city knew about the wedding of Rama. The citizens were greeting one another with beaming faces. The women were agog with happiness.

The King ordered for the chariots, elephants and horses to be decorated and saddled ceremoniously. He consulted his ministers also on the matters relating to the marriage. The chambers of the queens were echoing with music and songs sung by women. Outside the city, the marriage procession was being prepared.

The very next morning, in an auspecious hour, the procession started. The company consisted of the King, guru Vashist, family members, the ministers, chieftans and a large number of prominent citizens.

The grandeur of the procession overawed the citizens of Mithila when it reached there.

The processionists too very greatly impressed by the decoration of Mithila city, made to welcome the guests. The king Janaka was present at the very gate of the city along with an army of his family members and other bigwigs, besides the huge crowd of the citizens. The marriage party was led straight to the wedding hall. To make the occassion memorable, Janaka proposed marriages of the brothers of Rama, as well, with his other daughter and two neices. Dashratha accepted the proposal at once.

Hence, besides Rama, Laxmana was married to Urmila, Bharata to Mandvi and Shatrughana to Shrutikirti.

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The king Janaka gave so many gifts of gold, silver, precious stones and other valuables to the couples that they made a mountain. When the marriage party was preparing to depart along with the married couples, the king Janaka met the king Dashratha to express his happiness and the gratefulness. He said in a choked voice, "O King! Thank you for honouring me by accepting the proposals I made. I seek your forgiveness if I have taken advantage of your generosity. The happiness of my daughters and the neices had made me shamelessly selfish in seeking all your sons. Please pardon my mistake."

The king Dashratha took the folded hands of the king Janaka in his own hands and spoke, "Don't say that, O king Janaka. It is I who has been honoured by getting a chance of having multiple alliances with a noble family like yours and with a person of your greatness." And they embraced each other warmly.

Then, the procession set out for home.

When the news of the arrival of the marriage party spread in the city of Ayodhya, enthusiastic crowds raced towards the city gates. The city had been lit up with lamps. The roads were decorated with welcome arches, buntings and the festoons. The roads were lined up on both sides by eagerly waiting women and girls who stood with flowers and brass plates, with lit up lamps to offer traditional worship.

The palace was glittering with decorations. The queens had been busy ordering maids around getting everything ready since morning. Now, they stood at the gate to welcome the grooms and their brides.

On the instructions of guru Vashishta, the marriage party had halted outside the city. There, Dashratha performed

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the worship of Lord Shiva, Parvati and Ganesha. Then, the party entered the city.

The citizens greeted the party with great joy and fervour. The people were craning their necks to have a glimpse of the grooms and the brides. The procession was moving on foot. It was a great scene. Guru Vashishta led the party followed by Dashratha, the newly wed couples and others. The road was carpetted with flowers. The girls threw petals at them. The women performed worship every here and there, along the route.

At the gate of the palace, the mother queens quickly got over the worship ceremony and the blessing formalities. The rewards and the alms were given with same speed. The queens wanted to see the faces of their daughters-in-law as soon as possible. Then, the couples were led in.

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Second Chapter

AYODHYA KANDA

In consultation with guru Vashishta, the king Dashratha announces the crowning of Rama as king. Manthra poisons the ears of queen Kaikayee. Kaikayee invokes her two due boons. She demand crown for her son, Bharata and exile into wilds for Rama. Laxmana and Sita decide to accompany Rama on his exile. Gloom descends on the royal palace. Dashratha passes away sickened by the turn of events. Bharata returns from his maternal home. He rebukes his mother Kaikayee and Manthra for creating all the troubles. Bharata goes to the wilds to bring back Rama. Rama crosses the river Ganga by Kewats boat. He meets several sages and settles down in Chitrakoota. Bharata meets Rama and urges him to return to Ayodhya. But Rama is determined to complete 14 year exile. Bharata takes sandals of Rama and returns to Ayodhya to rule as a representative of the King in Exile.

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Old Age Knocks

For many days Ayodhya celebrated the weddings like a festival.

After some time, Bharata and Shatrughana went to their maternal homes respectively for a short period.

Rama and Laxmana began assisting their father in running the state.

One day, when the king Dashratha stood before a mirror to examine his crown before leaving for the royal court, he spotted a grey hair near his temple. It shocked him.

"The old age is knocking at the door," he muttered.

His heart said, "King! You are getting old. It is time to hand over the crown to dear Rama and get busy in penance for salvation of the soul. Rama is capable, efficient, popular and responsible prince, fit to be a king."

He liked the idea and went straight to the *ashram* of guru Vashishta to seek his advice.

There, after touching the guru's feet, the King sat down on the ground as was the custom of the *ashram*.

He spoke, "Respected Guru, I need your advice on a very urgent matter. That's why I am bothering you. I have an idea."

"What is that, King? Feel free to say," the guru said.

"O Sage! It is about Rama. He is a fine prince, very popular, brave and matured. I was thinking of putting my crown on his head. He can shoulder the responsibilities.

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Now I feel too old to continue ruling, what do you think?" the King explained.

"That is a sensible idea, King. I support it. Rama will prove an excellent king. But first, you must call the meeting of the court and get the idea passed." The guru advised.

"I will call the meeting tomorrow. You are also requested to attend it, O Guru."

Then, the King returned to Ayodhya.

Rama....the Crown Prince

The very next day, the king called a general meeting of the ministers and the members of his court. Guru Vashishta had also arrived. With the due permission of the guru, the king Dashratha addressed the meeting, "Honourable members and the ministers, this meeting has been called for a special purpose. I ruled this kingdom for a long time to the best of my ability and according to the traditions set by my ancestors. Now I feel old and too tired to continue. I wish to pass on my responsibilities on the shoulders of the eldest prince, Rama. He has all the qualifications of a worthy king. I want to know your opinion on this matter. If you have any objections, you can raise it without any fear."

"We all agree with you, O King," the assembly roared in one voice. A member declared," Prince Rama is an ideal choice. He is kind, valiant, wise and righteous. And above all we all love him."

There was no dissenting voice. All wanted Rama to be their King. The King announced, "We will honour your wish by declaring Rama as the Crown Prince today itself. And on an auspicious day, he will be crowned as king."

After getting consent of the assembly prince Rama was

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summoned to the court.

The King informed him, "Dear son Rama, I am getting old. This tired king needs rest. I want you to relieve me by taking over my responsibilities of being a king. All the members of this court want you to be their King."

Rama bowed to the court and spoke, "I shall feel honoured in obeying to your wishes and orders, Respected Sirs."

The members of the assembly greeted Rama with loud cheers and hailed him lustily.

Then, Rama touched the feet of his father. The king Dashratha hugged him in his arms and embraced him warmly.

Guru Vashishta was asked to calculate the most auspicious hour and day for the crowning ceremony.

He had already done his home work.

So, the time of the crowning of Rama was revealed then and there.

"It is going to be the day after tomorrow," the king remarked, "Good! There will be no long wait."

The meeting ended.

The King asked Sumanta to make arrangements for the crowning ceremony in consultation with guru Vashishta.

The news of Rama's crowning gladdened the citizens. The people were very excited. Their dreams of being ruled by Rama were coming true.

All the three queens were so delighted that they gave away their most valuable items of jewellery to the maids who gave them the news.

The guru of the royal family, Vashishta was worshipped by Rama and Sita in their palace, as tradition demanded.

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The Advice of the Family Guru

It was the tradition of the Sun dynasty that the guru of the royal family visited the palace of the would-be-king and and the queen, a day before the crowning ceremony, to preach them the duties of the king and the queen. This was what had brought guru Vashishta to the palace of Rama and Sita.

After the guru worship, Vashishta met them separately to lend his advice.

He preached to Rama, "Son, being king is not easy. It is a challenge. A true king is the servant of his people, not their ruler. Always pay heed to the council of ministers. Don't ignore the nobles and the members of the court. They will be your eyes and ears. Be kind to all. The justice should reach even the poorest. In war lead the army...."

Then, the guru preached to Sita, the duties of a queen.

And at the end, he blessed them both with his sincere good wishes.

Manthra' Game

The queen Kaikayee was resting in her chamber when her personal maid Manthra appeared. She was gifted to the queen by her mother's family at the time of her marriage to the king.

A pleased Kaikayee said to the maid excitedly, "O Manthra! Where were you all this time? All other maids got their rewards from me. Here, take my necklace! You know my Rama is to be crowned very soon as the king. How wonderful!"

Manthra took the necklace and tossed it to one side and spoke wickedly, "This is not the occasion to celebrate, O Simpleton Queen."

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"What rubbish!" Kaikayee shot back in angry surprise. "Isn't it a matter of joy that my Rama is going to become the King?"

"He will but not your son! Queen, think, what shall our Bharata get? He will become a slave to Rama forever. Rama becomes the king and Kaushalya will be the Queen Mother. And You....?"

Kaikayee stared at her in confusion.

"This is all conspiracy against Bharata. That's why he has not been informed even. Everything is being done behind his back. It's all hush-hush. You are too trusting and too simple. Poor queen!" Manthra was spewing venom.

"No, It is all your imagination, Manthra. The King won't let anything like that happen."

"King! Bah! Dashratha will no more be king. A powerless old man! Rama and Kaushalya will do anything they like. May be, Bharata and you will be exiled. They can even...."

Manthra kept poisoing her ears.

Kaikayee was having doubts now.

The idea of Kaushalya becoming the Queen Mother was making her jealous. She would herself be reduced to being stepmother of the king. The very thought was galling. Kaikayee was now looking clearly worried.

She said slowly, "But what can I do now? It is too late. All the people are with Rama."

"You can do a lot," Manthra whispered and added, "If you like, Bharata can become the king, and Rama should be exiled."

"How?"

"Remember, the king owes you two boons? Ask for those boons from the King—Crown for our Bharata, in one. And

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exile to Rama, in the other," Manthra smiled like a witch and continued, "This is the chance, dear Queen. Don't miss it or you will repent forever. Put on the mourning dress right away and sit in the protest chamber."

After poisoning the queen's mind, Manthra crept away like a snake.

In the evening, when the King came to the palace of Kaikayee, he learnt that the queen was in the Protest Chamber. He was shocked. Her being in grief and on protest at such happy occasion was a bad sign, very ominous. He couldn't think of any possible reason. He walked towards the Protest Chamber on weak legs.

Kaikayee In Protest Chamber

Kaikayee lay on floor dressed in black robes and her hair hung loose fanned around. The king Dashratha anxioulsy asked, "Dear Queen ! Why do you mourn at his happy hour? Tell me who has dared to displease you? I will make him pay. Stop mourning. Our Rama will become King day after tomorrow. You shall get what you want. Now smile."

A wicked smile danced on the lips of the queen.

She mocked, "Fine. In the hour of trouble you promise anything. But have you ever kept your word? Remember, You owe me two boons?"

"I do, Deer Queen. You never invoked them. That is not my fault. Your boons are due. You can invoke them any time, even right now. They shall be fulfilled as is the rules of our Raghu family forever."

"Let us see, O Dear King....," Kaikayee took advantage of the King's weakness and demanded, "For the first boon, I ask the throne of Ayodhya for Bharata and for the second,

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Rama be exiled for 14 years."

The queen's demands fell on the king Dashratha like bolts from the blue. He was shocked.

Blood froze in his veins.

Dashratha stared at Kaikayee in disbelief utterly puzzled.

"I hope that you remember how I was awarded those two boons. Once you got badly injured in the battle field, fighting against the demons. Then I had driven your chariot out to safety. For that deed you had given me the two boons. I had saved them for future as due promises with you, I invoke those boons today for the sake of our son, Bharata. Please honour the boons and act accordingly, or break the rule of Raghu family. The choice is entirely in your hands."

The king Dashratha pleaded in choked voice, "Dear Queen, Don't say so harsh words. Bharata and Rama are like my two eyes. 1 will summon Bharata and Shatrughana from their maternal homes in the morning. And if you insist, Bharata shall be crowned," these words were spoken with great pain. Dashratha sighed, "Rama does not covet the crown or the throne. Dear Queen, give up the mourning now. Get up and do proper make up."

"But what about the second boon?" the queen asked.

"Please, Dear Queen! Don't be so cruel. Revoke your second demand. I beg from you," the old king, infact fell on the feet of Kaikayee saying those words and beseeched, "Darling Queen! Take pity on my Rama. Why are you so hard on him? He is a saint. What wrong has he done to you?"

"O King! Stop trying to fool me by saying emotional words," the hard faced queen stepped back, away from grovelling king and added, "I want my boons honoured. Yes

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or No! No tricks please."

"O God! What dilemma you put me in!" the king Dasharatha burst in tears.

On the morning of the crowning, Rama and Sita were discussing about the ceremony, after pre-dawn bath, when a messenger came to them. He said, "I hail the Crown Prince! The King wants to see you immediately. He is presently at the palace of the queen Kaikayee."

"I am coming," said Rama and got up to go. He smiled at Sita, "Dear! It appears that mother Kaikayee is demanding something special for me on my crowning day. She is very kind and loves me more than she does to brother Bharata. Always did."

And Rama departed.

Meanwhile, all was set for the coronation ceremony. The crowning was scheduled for early in the day. But the King had not arrived in the court. And Rama too was missing. All the ministers and the members of the court had taken their seats.

A puzzled member asked Sumanta, "Sir, all the arrangements are made but we don't see the King and the Crown Prince, where are they?"

"I am myself wondering," a worried Sumanta said.

Another minister remarked, "Please minister Sumanta! Get some news about them. What is the problem? The auspicious hour is setting on."

"You are right. Guru Vashishta will be here any moment," Sumanta said uncertainly.

After some more waiting he announced, "They should have come much before the appointed time of the crowning. I am going to see that what's happening," saying so, Sumanta

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left the court.

Meanwhile, when Rama arrived at the palace of mother Kaikayee, he got some bad feeling.

Inside, King Dashratha lying unconcious on a bed. An angry and stiff figure of mother Kaikayee stood nearby. Her eyes were red and puffed due to weeping.

Rama asked with concern, "Mother, What is the matter? What happened to father? Is he sick?"

"Rama listen! The King is grieving for you."

"Why? I fail to understand."

"Well, your father owed me two boons. Today I invoked those boons. For one, I asked the throne of Ayodhya for Bharata. And for the other, a 14 year exile for you. That is why the king is mourning."

Rama smiled at mother Kaikayee and spoke in calm voice, "such a minor thing! Respected Mother, it falls upon the son to fulfil the promises given by the father. Your demands are kind orders to me. In meeting them lies my future and everyone's good. I am grateful to you for giving me this opportunity to redeem my life. Thank you for always being so kind to me."

After that, Rama went to his mother Kaushalya and informed her of all the latest developments. Mother Kaushalya heard the news is shocked silence.

Laxman's Decision

Laxmana, known for his short temper, came there in a huff on learning about Rama's exile. In an angry mood, he declared, "Brother! I think our dear father has lost his head due to old age and senility. How could he take away the rights of an innocent person like you? Being the eldest prince

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the crown and the throne belongs to you. We must fight against this injustice. Let's have you declared as the King. I shall deal with anyone who dares to stands in our way by my weapons."

"Cool down, Laxmana! Easy! The situation is delicate. It is the question of the honour and pride of our dynasty. Holding up values is more important than the crown. The promise has to be fulfilled. Who made the promises does not matter now. I shall obey the orders," Rama firmly announced.

"Alright. Then, 1 will come along," Laxmana said with equal resolve and added, "I can't live in Ayodhya without you."

"Oh! As you like, Laxmana," Rama knew that Laxmana had made up his mind. It was no use arguing with him. Mother Kaushalya sobbed, "Sons, if you two go, why should I stay back? Take me along."

"Mother! The father's condition is grave. He needs you badly. You must not desert him in this hour of grief. Please allow us to depart. The duty is calling me."

The mother burst into tears, "So, go son! I bless you. May the god of the wild always protect you."

Meanwhile, a maid had informed Sita about the developments. She ran to Rama barefoot. She insisted on accompanying him to exile. Rama tried to dissuade her but failed. At last, he agreed.

By now, the news had spread all over the palace. Whoever heard it got a rude shock and silently cursed Kaikayee.

On the other side, the trio of Rama, Sita and Laxmana went to the palace of the mother Kaikayee after getting leave of the mother Sumitra and consoling her. This time,

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the minister Sumant was also present there, being like a member of the family. He looked grief stricken.

As soon as the king Dashratha saw Rama, he collapsed on the floor. Rama rushed forward to pick him up and put him on the bed. All waited the King to regain his consciousness. When it came back, he wailed, "My dear Rama! Please don't leave me. I have been tricked by the queen Kaikayee."

"Father! Please don't be emotional. It is the question of the honour of our family and, of our great ancestors."

"Ah! The honour of the family is....well....but how shall we....???. If you insist, then take us along too, the whole family, all people and everything. Entire Ayodhya will shift into exile." the broken king Dashratha moaned.

"No father! Sorry! For me, now, palaces, regal life, treasures, family and Ayodhya are alien. Wilderness is my home and tribal life is my only possession. Brother Laxmana and Sita are adamant on keeping me company. So, we need three tribal dresses. I beg you to bless us to be on the path to wilderness where lies our honour and my duty."

They didn't have to worry about the dresses.

Because the wicked Manthra had already arranged for three saffron robes of medicants with the co-operation of queen Kaikayee.

After donning the saffron pieces, the trio of Rama, Sita and Laxmana took leave of sobbing Dashratha and the queen Kaikayee.

Inconsolable King whispered in the ears of the minister Sumanta, "Dear Minister, take them on the chariot to some nearby forest, roam around a little and bring them back somehow."

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Departure of Rama

After bidding farewell to all, Rama, Sita and Laxmana came out where a chariot waited for them. When they mounted on it, the people present there burst into tears and wept inconsolably. Many of them cursed the king and the culprit queen Kaikayee.

The chariot moved. Sumanta too was on the chariot. Some of the people had started beating their chests. One of them wailed, "Brothers, let us go with dear Rama and live wherever he does. We can't let him face the dangers of the cruel forests alone. We will stay with him."

"Yes, Yes! Come on," many said in chorus. A crowd followed the chariot.

Meanwhile, inside the palace, the departure of Rama and his two companions had thrown the king Dasharatha into fits of agony. He kept groaning, "Ah Rama! My dear Rama! Ah, Ah!!"

The Love of the People

Rama was moved to see the people following his chariot. He pleaded with them to return with folded hands. But no one would listen. They followed on sobbing. It pained Rama. The chariot reached at the banks of river Tamsa by the evening, where Rama broke the journey. The crowd of people camped there with Rama. Infact, the tired people just lay around him on the ground like wounded soldiers. The grief and exhaustion put them to deep sleep in a short time. After midnight, Rama woke up Sumanta and whispered to him, "Sir, please get the chariot ready. We must slip away before anyone wakes up. The people must return to their homes for the sake of my mission."

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Sumanta complied unwillingly and the chariot left quietly leaving behind the poor sleeping devotees.

Meeting Nishadraj

In the morning, when the followers of Rama found the chariot and their idols gone, they understood the situation. The people cursed their luck and returned to their homes.

Meanwhile, the chariot had reached Shringverpur which was on the bank of the river Ganga.

Rama, Sita and Laxmana alighted from the chariot and paid obeisance to holy Ganga. They took bath and decided to rest.

The news of the arrival of Rama had reached the tribal king Nishad Raj, who had become a firm devotee of Rama.

He rushed to the service of Rama along with his family and a load of wild fruits and flowers.

He fell on Rama's feet and prayed, "O Lord! we feel redeemed. I am your humble servant. Please come with me to my palace and be my guest."

Rama hugged him and said, "Friend, your love overwhelms me. But we can't come to your palace because we are ordered to live like ascetics for fourteen years by our father."

"Oh!" Nishad Raj sighed.

Rama requested, "Friend, do us a favour instead. Arrange a boat to take us across the Ganga."

Nishad Raj at once departed to do the needful.

Rama spoke to Sumanta, "Sir, you must also return to Ayodhya now. Our real journey into exile starts from this point. Thank you for all the kind things you have done for us."

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Sumanta was in tears, "Don't say those words. I can't go back to your father without you. Let me stay with you."

Rama said, "Respected Sumanta sir, please go back to your king and do your duty as a minister, and help us do our duty. Kindly leave us alone."

And Sumanta had to return with a heavy heart.

Devotion of Kevat

Nishad Raj sent a message to Rama that a boat was arranged. On the river bank, the boatman, Kewat refused to ferry Rama when he was approached. When an amused Rama asked the reason, Kewat replied, "Lord, the dust of your feet has miracle powers. I hear that a stone figure got turned into a woman by it. If it turns my boat too into some woman I will get ruined. Because this boat is my sole means of earning a living."

"So, what is the solution?" Rama smiled sweetly.

"It is simple, Lord," Kevat saw his trick working and added, "Let me wash the dust off your feet. Then, you may get into my boat."

"Very clever, Kevat," Rama remarked and said with a smile," You win. But hurry up and get us across quick."

Kevat brought a wooden tub with water and washed Rama's feet with ecstatic devotion. All the tribals knew that Rama is the incarnation of Lord Vishnu. The act of Kevat would be his salvation.

After that, the boatman, Kevat got the three passengers at the other side of the river in his boat. Kevat put his head on the feet of Rama, Sita and Laxmana when they stepped out of the boat. There, Rama stood embarrassed as he had no money to pay for the fare. Sita saw it and handed him her ring after taking it off her finger. Rama offered the

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ring to Kevat, "Here, take it for the fare."

"Lord! What fare? It is a barter deal. Service for service. I got you across this river and you must get me across the river that separates this world of woes and the heaven, when the time comes."

Rama, Sita and Laxmana, all three smiled.

Kevat bowed and departed. Before moving ahead, Rama and Sita worshipped Lord Shiva and mother Ganga respectively.

Sage Bhardwaj' Ashram

After the worship, Rama and the company walked through a dense forests to reach the famous pilgrim destination, Prayaga, one day. After ablutions they paid a visit to the ashram of the famous sage Bhardwaj. The sage was overjoyed to see Rama, Sita and Laxmana and heartily welcomed them, "Rama! O God! Today, I feel rewarded for all my penance, meditation, fasts, pilgrimages and sacrifices. All my hopes and dreams are fulfilled."

Rama said, "O Great Sage! It is merely your kindness, sir, Whomever you pay respect attains the greatness and nobility." And then, he humbly made a request, "Sage! Please suggest us some place where we can live peacefully for sometime."

The sage answered, "Rama! I will suggest you the Chitrakoot mountain which is situated on the other side of the river. Just the scenic and serene place you need."

And, after taking leave of the sage, the trio moved on.

Demise of the King Dashratha

When the minister Sumanta reached Ayodhya, the evening was falling. He was very worried for returning without

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Rama, Sita and Laxmana. How would he show his face to the king Dashratha and the people of Ayodhya?

Everyone, wrongly or rightly, expected him to bring them back. Sumanta was feeling guilty for the failure. He waited outside the city for the darkness to dense.

Under the cover of darkness, he somehow managed to reach the palace. A maid took him to the palace of queen Kaushalya where Dashratha was lying on a bed moaning for Rama.

Sumanta bowed his head in salute and quietly sat down.

The King opened his eyes and looked towards the door hopefully before asking, "Sumanta! Where is Rama? And Laxmana?? Where is daughter Sita???"

The condition of the king brought tears to the eyes of Sumanta. He stammered, "Forgive me, O King!! failed! I failed !" And Sumanta started sobbing.

Dashratha wailed like a child, "Rama! My Rama! O My Rama!"

The condition of Dashratha was pitiable. Queen Kaushalya sat dumbly.

Sumanta tried to console him, "O Great King! You are so religious, so learned and so brave! You can understand the situation better than I can. How dare I tell you that the high and low, light and darkness, good and bad and happiness and grief, they are the things fated? You know all that but fail to remember strangely. The loss of dear Rama is affecting you, the person of great fortitude and wisdom, more than it should have naturally. Please collect yourself. Sages like you take everything in their stride calmly."

And Sumanta consoled the King for quite a long time

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and gave him the news about the exilees in detail.

The king Dashratha groaned, "You are right, my wise Sumanta. Everything is fated by *Karma*. It is a curse that is causing this tragedy to me."

"What curse, O My Lord?" the queen Kaushalya asked in surprise.

The king Dashratha narrated a tale in reply—

It happened before I got married you three queens. Once I went for hunting. I perched on a tree waiting for some deer.

All day no deer came into my sight. The evening arrived and it became slightly dark.

Then, I heard a noise. I tried to listen carefully. It appeared to me that a deer was drinking water behind the cover of a bush. I shot an arrow capable of hitting the source of the sound and I heard a human cry "Ah!" as the arrow found its target.

I ran to the spot and found a young man fatally injured by the arrow. I was shocked. I apologized for my mistake and sought his forgiveness.

The dying young man said, "King! What is fated shall happen. Don't grieve for me. Please give this water to my blind parents who sit under a tree a little distance away. After they quench their thirst, tell them that their son Sharwan Kumar was not fortunate enough to continue to serve them any more."

I went to his parents with the pitcher of water and offered them water. The old blind couple sensed that I was not their son. I had to introduce myself and reveal the entire tragedy of the killing of their son.

On hearing the sad news, they broke down and started

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wailing. Soon, in death throes, they put a curse on me before dying, "O king! The way the loss of our dear son kills us, you shall meet your death in the same manner, grieving for your son."

Then I thought little of that curse because I was not even married.

I returned after giving proper funeral to the dead blind couple and their son as human duty demanded. Now, I see that the curse is working. I am going to die, pining tor my dear Rama. Nothing can save me."

And the king Dashratha suffered a stroke and cried, "Rama! O Rama!" His body shook in throes of agony and he breathed his last.

The death of the king started waves of wailing and crying throughout the palace. The queens broke their bangles and the maids wept beating their breasts. The news spread out and the city of Ayodhya went into mourning. The people were cursing the queen Kaikayee for creating the present troubles, the kingdom was going through.

In the morning, the minister Sumanta despatched a chariot to fetch the family priest, Guru Vashishta.

Bharata & Shatrughana Back to Ayodhya

On hearing the news of the demise of Dashratha, guru Vashishta rushed to the palace. He consoled all the grieving members and despatched express horse men to fetch Bharata and Shatrughana from their maternal homes. Meanwhile, the body of the late king Dashratha was kept in a tub of oil to save it from decaying. The death of their father started Bharata and Shatrughana on the journey back to Ayodhya at once.

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After eight days, they reached the home city where the people informed them about all that had taken place in their absence. The brothers marched into the queen Kaikayee's palace in angry mood.

The sight of Bharata filled the heart of his mother with glee. Kaikayee looked overjoyed even in that hour of all round sadness. This angered Bharata. He cursed, "O Evil Woman! You rejoice in the tragedy that has struck us? You have ruined our family. Why didn't you turn into stone the moment you thought of those two awful boons! Your tongue should have rotted before making such demands. You felt no pity for us. You don't deserve to be called a mother. I disown you!"

Just then, the evil Manthra came there all excited, chirping, "Bharata! My lucky prince!" and making a show of the fine jewellery she was wearing. Shatrughana felt outraged and he reacted in great anger by slamming the hunched back of the evil Manthra, with his foot. "Wicked Witch! Get out of our sight!" Shatrughana exploded.

The hunchback Manthra fell down. Her hump burst like a kicked watermelon and she wailed, "AYEEE! AYEEE!"

Then, the brothers reached the palace of the mother Kaushalya where the body of their father, Dashratha lay. They sat in mourning by the side of the dead king. Their weeping made the mothers and other women present there go in the loud wailings again.

Guru Vashishta tried to console them, "Sons! The life and death is nature's law. So are the pain and happiness. Nothing is in human hands. It is God's will. Get control over yourselves because a duty awaits to get done. The king must be given funeral and the last rite are to be performed."

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Bharata asked the minister Sumanta to make the necessary arrangements. The minister had already made all the preparations. The dead king, Dashratha's body was duly consigned to the flames according to the royal customs and religious rites.

After fifteen days of the state mourning, meeting of all the Lords of the court was held which was attended by Bharata as well. The meeting was called on the direction of guru Vashishta. All the ministers, commanders, governors and the top representatives of trade and of other fields were present. The mood was grim.

Guru Vashishta, first of all, explained the duties of a king and the general procedures of the royal court and administration to Bharata. Then, he advised, "Prince Bharata! The late king had willed that you were to the crowned and handed over the rule of the kingdom. So, stop mourning and obey the will of your father."

"Forgive me, O Guru. I think it was not my father's will. He could never do such an injustice. He was religious and a wise king of great learning. The truth is that to make me king was the queen Kaikayee's will, an evil will. The father's will, will be honoured. His will was to make brother Rama, the king. And Rama will wear the crown. It's my pledge."

All the members of the meeting looked towards Bharata in great admiration. Many of them murmured, 'He is a real saint'. The assembly was totally behind him.

"But how is it possible, son?" Vashishta asked doubtfully.

"O Guru sir! Bless me for my success in my mission. I suggest that we all go to the wild wherever brother Rama currently is and put the crown on his head. Then, we will bring him back to Ayodhya through pleading with him. I

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am sure my brother, Rama won't reject my prayer."

All the members of the court supported Bharata. Guru Vashishta also saw no harm in it. Sumanta was asked to make necessary arrangements for the mass travel.

The next day, Bharata set out towards the forests along with all three mother queens, ministers, members of the court, relatives, dignitaries, prominant citizens, soldiers and the devotees of Rama. The king Janaka was also in Ayodhya having come to attend in the funeral of the dead king. He too accompanied the crowd that Bharata was taking along.

Meanwhile, Rama had settled down at a place on the bank of the holy river Mandakini, He was living there with Sita and Laxmana in a straw hut, erected by the two brothers with their own hands. On that day, Rama and Sita sat under a tree enjoying the shade and the breeze. As usual, Laxmana strolled around some distance away, doing guard duty. Rama happened to look up at skies to spot clouds and to his surprise, he saw flocks of frightened birds flying towards south. He called out to Laxmana, "Brother Laxmana! Please find out why these birds act so frightened!"

"As you say," said Laxmana and reached up to the top of a nearby hill to survey. He cried out, "Brother! I see Bharata, driven mad by power, coming to crush us with a huge army. I will put him in his place." Laxmana strummed the string of his bow challengingly.

Rama sweetly smiled at his brother and said," Brother Laxmana! You get overconcerned like a mother and start imagining things. Your fear is misplaced. Our brother, Bharata is a saint. No greed of power can corrupt him. Let's him come and you will see."

From a distance, Bharata spotted the hut Rama was

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living in. He ordered the solidiers to halt and ran himself barefoot to meet Rama crying "Brother! Brother!" Rama too raced to meet him calling out. "My dear Brother! My Bharata!" Both ran into each other's arms emotionally charged.

"Bharata! My brother! What brings you here? Is everything all right?" Rama asked after a while. By then, others too had reached there.

"Oh brother....," Bharat began to say but could not add more words. He hugged Rama and sobbed.

Meanwhile, Laxmana was feeling embarrassed at his suspecting Bharata. He apologized to Bharata for his mistake. Bharata just smiled and embraced Laxmana. Both held each other tightly for sometime.

Then, Bharata wept and in between sobs gave his brothers the sad news of the death of their father.

Rama wailed like an ordinary person and grieved for the death of his father crying, "Oh Father! Dear Father! I am orphanned! Ah! Ah!!"

Guru Vashishta gave him consolation with his words of sympathy and advice. And Bharata stated the real purpose of his coming.

Rama said, "Bharata! My dear Brother! I can't do that. 1 must see the promise given by father to the mother Kaikayee fulfilled."

Bharata argued, "Brother! If someone is required to live in wilderness to fulfil that promise, then let me be that person."

"No dear Bharata! It is I who has been awarded the fourteen year exile and you are to rule the kingdom. So, consider it your duty to be the king and rule."

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"If that is an order brother, I too have made a resolve. You will be the King in any way. I will put your sandals on the throne and rule only as your agent," and Bharata sat at the feet of Rama.

The devotion of Bharata Inwards his brother Rama, overwhelmed everyone present there including Sita and Laxmana.

Rama had to let Bharata return to Ayodhya with his sandals.

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Third Chapter

ARANYA KANDA

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The Forest Life

Rama met the sage Atri. The wife of the sage, Ansuya, gave words of advice to Sita on the virtues of a wife. Rama slayed the demon, Viradha. Upon seeing a huge mountain of the bones of the saints and sages killed by the demons, Rama took a vow to destroy the killers. Sage Agastya gifted Rama powerful weapons. The demoness, Shurpnakha tried to harm Sita, and Laxmana cut off her nose. This brought her brothers Khara and Dhushana with their army of demons to wage a war with Rama and Laxmana. All the demons got killed, Shurpnakha went to complain to her mighty brother, Ravana, the King of Lanka. To take revenge, Ravana plotted with his maternal uncle Mareecha to kidnap Sita. The illusion artist Mareecha transformed himself into a golden deer and showed itself to Sita. She asked Rama to get the lovely deer for her. Rama went after the deer and hunted it with his arrow. Meanwhile, Laxmana got tricked into leaving Sita alone in the hut. And Ravana got the opportunity to kidnap Sita. Rama's friend Jatayu tried to challenge Ravana but the mighty demon fatally wounded Jatayu and escaped. Rama and Laxmana searched for Sita in every bush and every forest. They encountered a giant demon Kabandha and liberated it from a curse. The brothers, on the way were treated to the loving hospitality of a tribal devotee Shabri. She guided Rama and Laxmana towards Pampasura.

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Rama in *Ashrams* of Sages

Bharata returned with Rama's sandals to Ayodhya and Rama departed from Chitrakoot. Further ahead, he stayed at the *ashram* of sage Atri and his wife Ahalya. The sage couple worshipped Rama. By now, the sages and the common people had accepted Rama to be the true incarnation of Lord Vishnu. Hence, he had become Lord Rama (Shri Rama) virtually. On his way further, at one place, he saw a mountain of the human bones near the huts of the sages. It was revealed that a huge demon called Viradha was killing the sages. It angered Lord Rama. And suddenly Viradha appeared there and started roaring like a dragon. He was put to death, at once by Lord Rama.

From there, Lord Rama, Sita and Laxmana reached at the ashram of sage Agastya and received his blessings. The sage rewarded Lord Rama with many divine weapons. Upon Rama's enquiry, the sage told him about a place called Panchavati, some distance away, which he thought, was fit for the living of Rama and his family. The place had good natural surroundings.

The three moved towards Panchavati. On their way, they came across the king of vultures, Jatayu. He spoke, "O Rama! I was a close friend of your late father, king Dasharatha. I live near Panchavati. You can live at Panchavati comfortably. It will be a blessing for me also." Jatayu showed them the way to Panchavati. At a suitable spot, the brothers raised a straw hut. Then, Lord Rama took a dip in the nearby river Godavari and entered the hut with Sita and Laxmana after a proper worship and due customs, to make it home.

The family started living there happily in the warmth of one another's love. The presence of Lord Rama and

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Laxmana provided protection to all the sages and the tribals living around. The green surroundings and nature's beauty acted as a soothing balm for Lord Rama, Sita and Laxmana. The life was serene and peaceful.

Shurpnakha, the Bignails

One day, a demoness named Shurpnakha, known for her shovel-like nails, passed by Panchavati. She was the sister of the mighty king of Lanka, Ravana. Shurpnakha happened to see the handsome brothers, Rama and Laxmana. She fell for their beauty and wished to romance with them or marry one of them. She thought, "I shall have to trick them." The lustful demoness, Shurpnakha transformed herself into a beautiful woman and approached Rama. She said, "O Handsome Youngman! Who are you? Why do you live in this demon controlled area? Don't you fear the demons?"

"O lady! I don't see any reason to fear the demons. I am Rama, the son of the late king Dashratha of Kaushal kingdom. I have been exiled for 14 years. I decided to live those years in the peace of this place. Now, tell me who you are, O lady?" Rama explained and queried.

"I am Shurpanakha. Khara and Dushana are my cousin brothers who control this area. O lovely Prince! In this way I am a princess of this place. Marry me and live happily here forever."

"O Beauty," Rama said in jest with a charming smile, "You see the woman here? She is my wife, Sita. So, I can't marry you unfortunately. But yes, there you can see my younger brother, Laxmana. If he agress to...."

Shurpnakha went to Laxmana who guessed that his brother was trying to pull his leg. Laxmana joked, "Lady! I

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am merely a servant of the Prince Rama. Would you like to become a maid by marrying me?"

She again went to Rama and insisted on the marriage. Rama had to refuse in clear words which angered her. Shurpnakha yelled, "You are rejecting me for that woman Sita! Wait! I will finish her!" Suddenly she changed into a demoness and lunged towards Sita. That frightened Sita and she called out for help.

"Laxmana! Stop her please!"

Laxmana, at once drew out his sword and ran towards Shurpnakha. In one swift move he slashed off her nose and rebuked, "Wicked Demoness! That is your punishment for trying to harm my sister-in-law." With bleeding remainder of her nose, Shurpnakha ran away crying and cursing. She reported the matter to her cousin brothers, the demons, Khara and Dushana with a lot of lies added. She claimed that two miserable tribal youth did that to her.

It drove Khara and Dushana mad with anger, They set out with a huge army of fearsome demons to teach a lesson to the two tribals.

Khara & Dushana Slained

Lord Rama saw the large army of the demons coming from a long distance. He assessed the situation and said to Laxmana, "Brother! Go to some safe cave with Sita and stay there, Meanwhile I will deal with these demons."

Laxmana obeyed his instructions. Khara-Dushana army of fourteen thousand demons launched an attack on Rama."

Lord Rama counter attacked single handedly. The heads of the demons began rolling off their bodies severed. Khara and Dushana watched with awe the skill of Rama in raining

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down arrows. Every arrow multiplied into thousands and dealt death to the demons. Rama used hypnotic illusion too, which made every demon see Rama in another demon. The enemies started killing one another. Khara and Dushana watched it terrified and they ran away in panic. Lord Rama targetted them, one after the another with his arrows and finished them. Their deaths demoralised the surviving demons and they ran away helter and skelter.

Ravana's Reaction

"What?" Ravana was surprised to hear a demon give him the news of the death of Khara and Dushana and he remarked, "No ordinary humans could kill my mighty brothers. That's impossible!"

"Excuse me, Your Highness," the demon said trembling with fear, "But it is true. I witnessed it."

"If it is true than those stupid tribals have asked for trouble, My sword will spell out the trouble. Death!" The demon king was shaking in rage.

Then, he asked that demon to go back and ask the remaining demons to keep up courage.

The King ordered his Prime Minister to call a special meeting of all the demon Lords.

When the demon Lords sat down for the meeting, the king Ravana informed them of the death of Khara and Dushana. They were asked to suggest ways to deal with the situation. An old and wise minister spoke, "O King! Those two tribals are no ordinary humans. They are sons of the late Ayodhya king Dashratha.

It is believed that they are god incarnates. It will be foolish to challenge them to battle. We must use cunning. I

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hear that Rama's wife Sita is with them. You must kidnap her and Rama will die pining for her."

"Humm....," Ravana nodded his head, "Yes, it's a good suggestion, Minister. I will consult Mareech about it." Then the meeting was dismissed.

Ravana got on his aircraft Pashpaka and flew to where Mareech lived.

Mareech was informed of the situation and asked to give his opinion.

Mareech was infact maternal uncle of the king Ravana.

He spoke after some thinking, "O king of Lanka! The minister who suggested the kidnap of Sita is your enemy in the friend's guise. By doing such a stupid thing, don't make Lord Rama your enemy. I am also sure that Rama is the incarnation of Lord Vishnu. Rama kills demons like you kill wild pigs on your hunting missions. I will advise you to forget about making war with Rama."

Ravana paid heed to his maternal uncle's advice and returned to his palace. He did nothing.

Shurpnakha in Ravana's Court

But Ravana could remain idle only for a few days. One day, Shurpnakha appeared in the court weeping and creating a scene. She wailed, "Shame Brother! It is a great shame!"

"Ah, Shurpnakha!" She was still wearing the blood soaked clothes and her nose-stub bled over a crust of black dried blood. It shocked Ravana, "What? Who did that to you? Who has earned the ire of Ravana?"

"Brother! They are two princes of Ayodhya. A beautiful woman is with them. They did this to me to please that woman. I complained about it to brothers, Khara and

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Dushana. They went to teach those two a lesson with a large army of demons. But the princes somehow killed them both and destroyed the demon army. Brother! If you don't take revenge for my insult, then, fie on your valour!"

"Don't worry. Your dishonour shall be avenged. No one stays alive on this earth after humiliating the sister of the king of Lanka. None! Not even God."

Greatly upset, Ravana left the court and Shurpnakha went towards the chambers of Mandodari, the queen of Ravana and her sister-in law.

Mareech was worried at seeing Ravana again. He almost knew that Ravana had changed his mind and would press on putting his evil idea into action. As Mareech feared, Ravana repeated his earlier desire to move against Rama. Mareech tried his best to dissuade Ravana but this time Ravana's mind was full of evil. He shouted at Mareech, " Idiot! Don't try to preach me. I am the most powerful on this earth. Don't you know?"

"I know, O mightly Ravana but...."

"Don't but me," Ravana shot back and added, "Just listen what you must do. Use your sorcery powers and become a deer of gold. Gambol around their hut so that Sita sees you. She will ask Rama to get you. You take him far away playing your tricks. Then you shall cry in Rama's voice 'Ah Laxmana! Ah Laxmana!' That will call Laxmana too away from the hut, and I will kidnap Sita. Easy! Agree to do it or you shall die!" Ravana raised his sword menacingly.

Mareech thought, "In both ways I die. So, why die at the hands of this evil demon? The death given by Rama will earn me a place in the heaven." Thus, Mareech transformed into a golden dear and set out on his mission.

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The Golden Deer

Lord Rama and Sita were sitting outside their hut enjoying the sights of the nature. Suddenly, a golden deer came into their view and gambolled towards the river bank. The yellow glitter of the deer fascinated Sita. She excitedly squealed, "Look dear! Look, Look! What a beauty! That beautiful creature should be a pan of our home!"

"Yes, very dazzling!" Rama agreed with her.

"Brother!" Laxmana interrupted, "That dear does not look real. I think it's some trick to fool us. Some black magic or sorcery!"

But Sita ignored what Laxmana said. She was begging Rama, like a child, to go and get the deer for her. Rama could not break her heart. Leaving Sita to the care of Laxmana, Rama went after the deer with his bow and arrows. The deer raced towards the forest as planned.

Rama followed the deer. At the very first chance, he aimed and shot his arrow. The arrow went deep into the back of the deer and it collapsed crying out, "Ah Laxmana! Ah Laxmana!" before dying.

Meanwhile, Sita heard the voice. Mareech had mimicked Rama's voice. She said worriedly, "Oh Laxmana ! It looks that you brother is in trouble. He is calling you. Go to his help."

Laxmana didn't want to leave Sita alone. But disobeying her was also not possible for him. He drew a line around the hut with an arrow of divine powers and said, "Mother! Don't step out of this circle under any circumstances. I go to find the brother and see what is happening."

Laxmana picked up his bow and departed from there and headed towards the forest.

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Abduction of Sita

Meanwhile, Ravana waited for Laxmana to depart, hiding behind a nearby tree. He was in the guise of a *Sadhu*. Ravana went near the hut and called out like a mendicant, "Give me alms, lady." The ladies of high families were tought never to let any *sadhu* go empty handed from their doorsteps. So, Sita went inside to bring some flour.

Ravana stepped forward and unwittingly touched the line drawn by Laxmana. At once, flames leapt towards him. He knew that it was some divine protection line and crossing it would mean disaster. Hence, when Sita came out he announced, "Sorry lady! I don't accept bonded alms. If you wish to give, you must step out of this line. Or I return without alms."

Not honouring a *Sadhu's* call for alms was unthinkable for Sita and an unkind act. She innocently stepped out of the line. And in a flash, Ravana threw away his begging bowl and grabbed Sita's arm, laughing wickedly.

This outrage made Sita ask angrily, "Who are you, imposter? How dare you touch me with your evil hand!"

"Ha....Ha....Ha!" Ravana revealed his true indentity and informed, "I am the mightly King of Lanka, Ravana!" Then, he forcibly gathered Sita and loaded her on his shoulder as Sita tried to wriggle free.

Some distance away stood Ravana's chariot which could travel through the air. He got into his air chariot and took off. Sita tried to fight Ravana off all the time calling out to Lord Rama and Laxmana for help.

"O dear Lord! Please protect me! O Laxmana! Save you sister! A demon dishonours me. Please....please!" she wailed. The birds flying in ths sky flapped their wings in sympathy.

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And the old king of vultures, Jatayu happened to hear the cries of Sita. He recognised her voice. The vulture managed to fly to reach in the vicinity of the flying chariot and called out, "O Daughter Sita! Don't lose heart! I will deal with this evil demon King." Jatayu swooped on Ravana and tried to hit him with his giant wings. He challanged, "O lowly Demon! Why do you invite your own death by abducting the wife of Lord Rama? Fie on you, O Son of Sin! Free Sita if you want to stay alive!"

Meanwhile, on the other side, Laxmana had gone deep into the forest. He saw Rama coming towards him. Laxmana dashed to him and asked anxiously, "Brother! Are you all right? We thought you called my name."

"You were right, dear Laxmana! That deer was no real. It was the sorcerer demon, Mareech. He tricked me into getting drawn into the deep of this forest. When I shot my arrow at him, he called your name in my voice."

"All this can't happen without some big reason," Laxmana said thoughtfully and added, "Brother! There is some big plot in the making to harm us."

"Well, Laxmana, Let's go home first." Lord Rama and Laxmana walked together for their hut.

At the hut, they found no sign of Sita. It worried them greatly. They wandered around looking for Sita. In sheer desperation they started asking trees and all the creatures they came across, "O Oak Tree, O Parrot, O Cuckoo! O Bush! Have you seen Sita? Say something somebody! Tell us what do we do?"

They met no success. Then, they heard the voice of old Jatayu coming from behind a bush. He was moaning "O Rama! O Lord Rama!" Rama and Laxmana rushed forward and found

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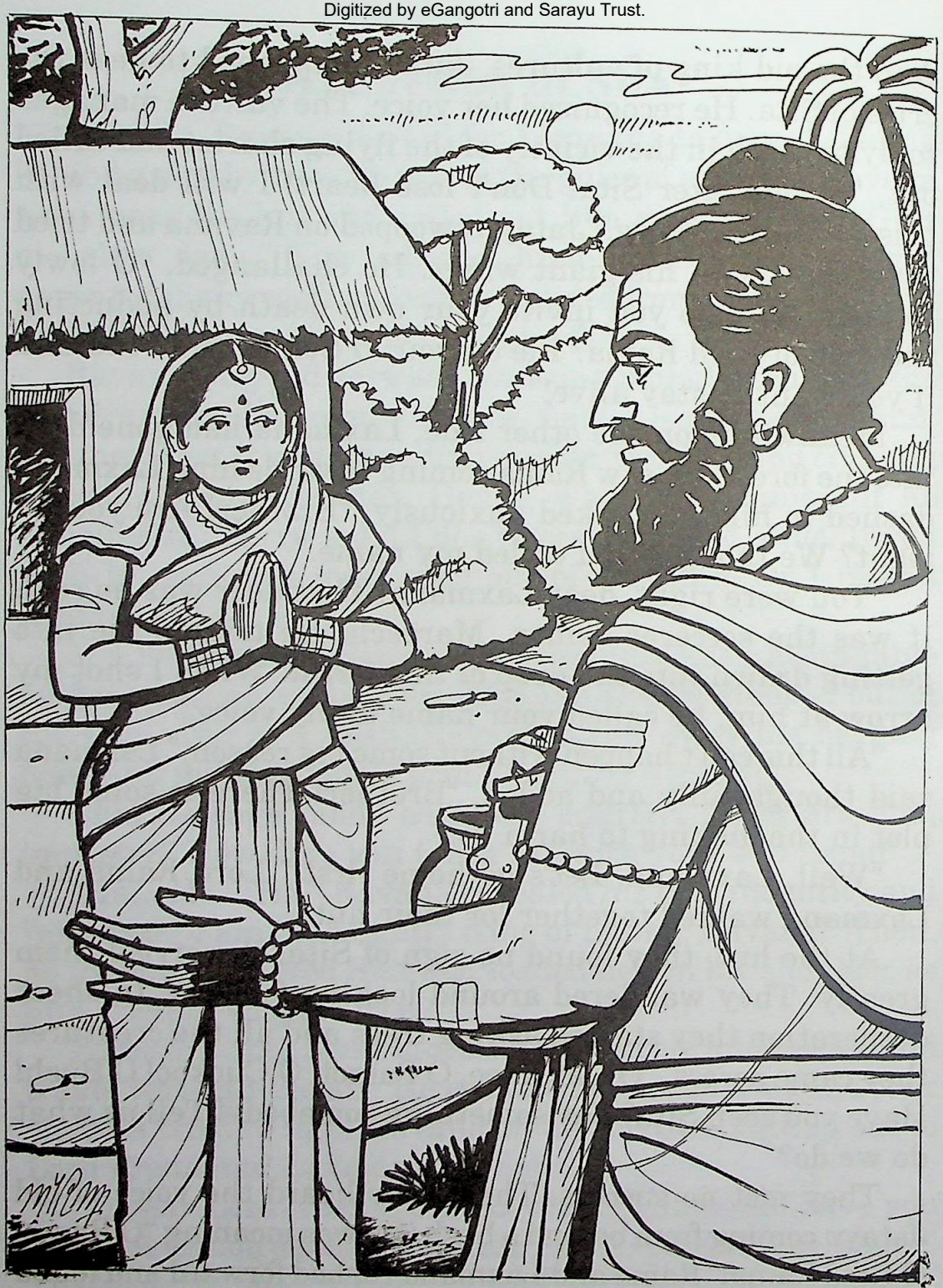

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Jatayu fatally wounded. His wings had been chopped off and he was lying on the ground in a helpless state, bleeding.

"O Vulture king, dear Jatayu!" Rama screamed and he picked the bird in his arms and asked overwhelmed, "Sir, who hurt you in this way? Oh Dear!"

"You came at right time, Lord Rama. A dead Jatayu couldn't have helped you," Jatayu spoke haltingly between fits of agony, "Ravana....The demon King,....has abducted daughter....Sita....I tried to rescue her....! Fought....even managed to get her off the demon's chariot....but....but....just then the demon chopped away my wings....and I fell down like....a stone!"

"Where has he taken her?" Anxious Rama wanted to know.

"I don't know exactly, son. Ravana's air charrot was flying towards the south and the daughter Sita was dropping her....ornaments....down."

"Who is this, Ravana, O Vulture King?"

"Ravana is the King of demons, the son of sage Vishrava....and....and....O Lord Rama....Ah!" saying these words Jatayu died and his head hung down to one side. Lord Rama and Laxmana were grief stricken. Sobbing uncontrolably, Rama rocked the old Jatayu's dead body in his arms and wailed, "O Respected Vulture King! Rama salutes to your greatness a million times. You were the friend of ray late father. Hence, it is my duty to perform your last rites."

Lord Rama and Laxmana gave a proper funeral with all religious rites to the body of the dead Jatayu. Then they moved ahead looking for Sita and reached the Kronch forest. They roamed around calling out Sita's name and asking every tree, bush and creature about her. In reply, the brothers only got silence. Even air remained still.

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Lord Rama and Laxmana flopped down too exhausted. They didn't know which way to go. Suddenly, out of nowhere a horrible looking demon appeared and stood before them snarling. Lord Rama drew out his sword and cut the demon to pieces. The brothers collected wood and made fire for the funeral of the slain demon. As they threw pieces of the dead demon into the fire a miracle happened. A graceful man rose out of the fire and stepped out. With folded hands he spoke, "I pay obeisance to Lord Rama."

"Who are you?"

"Oh! My name is Kabandha. I was a Gandharva. A curse put on me had transfored me into a demon. Your holy hands lifted that curse off me. 1 must tell you the way to find Mother Sita. O Lord! You should seek out the king of the monkeys, Sugreeva. He will help you find her." With these words Kabandha dissolved in the air.

The brothers walked further ahead to reach the banks of a Lake at the west side of Pampapur. There, a tribal ascetic woman named Shabari lived in a hut. She was overwhelmed to see Lord Rama and Laxmana standing outside her hut. She began praying to Lord Rama dazed with devotion. Shabri led them inside and made them sit. She offered them a small basketful of berries to eat. Infact, she had tasted every single berry to make sure that no berry was bitter.

Lord Rama began eating the berries with relish. But Laxmana stealthily tossed them around as he saw the tooth mark on every fruit. Rama whispered in his ear, "Brother! These are the marks of her devotion and love for us. Savour them."

Then, with the permission of Lord Rama, Shabari embraced death and departed for her heavenly abode.

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Fourth Chapter

KISHKINDHA KANDA

Lord Rama and Laxmana reached Rishyamook mountains looking for Sita. The king of the monkeys, Sugreeva lived there. Arrival of the aliens worried him. He sent his aid Hanumana to investigate Rama and Laxmana. Hanumana met the brothers in the guise of a Brahmin and learned about their story. Then, he took Rama and Laxmana to Sugreeva to make them allies. Rama killed Sugreeva's brother Bali who had taken away the former's kingdom. Sugreeva was crowned king again. In return, Sugreva promised to help the brothers find out Sita's whereabouts. The monkey army was sent in all directions to locate her. Jatayu's brother Sampati informed Hanumana and his group that Ravana had taken Sita to his capital and she was a prisoner in Ashoka garden. Who would dare to go to Lanka? At last, Hanumana was persuaded to undertake the dangerous mission. Jamwant, the lieutenant of the Hanumana group suggested to him to bring all the information about Sita. Only after that further action was to be planned under Lord Rama's guidance.

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Meeting Hanumana

Lord Rama and Laxmana continued their search. They just wandered about, without any direction, destination or any clue, hoping to come across Sugreeva. They came to Rishyamook mountain, one day. There, a *Brahmin* ran into them and he politely asked with folded hands, "O Honoured Guests! Where do you come from and what is the purpose of your kind visit?"

"O Learned *Brahmin!* We are the sons of the late king Dasharatha of Kaushal kingdom. I am Rama and with me is my younger brother Laxmana. We are in exile. My wife Sita was with us also. But sadly, an evil demon named Ravana has kidnapped her. We are wandering everywhere in search of her. Same search brings us here."

"Aha! 1 am blessed to see you, O Lord Rama," Hanumana bowed his head and paid obeisance.

Laxmana requested, "O *Brahmin* sir! Kindly give us the pleasure of getting your introduction." At this, Hanumana transformed into his real self and fell at the feet of Lord Rama.

He prayed, "O Lord! I am your humble servant and the chief assistant of the king of the monkey's, Sugreeva. My master, Sugreeva is in trouble. His brother Bali has taken away his crown and his wife. We live in this mountain as refugees due to tear of Bali. Come with me, O Lord. Master Sugreeva will be a great help in finding Mother Sita."

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Lord Rama picked Hanumana up and hugged him. He spoke, "Dear Hanumana! You are the good agent of your king. Infact, we ourselves wanted to meet the king Sugreeva. If he agrees to help us in search of Sita, we shall get the crown of the kingdom of Kishkindha and make him the king again."

"So shall it be, My Lord. Let's go. The land route is very difficult. Hence, ride on my shoulders and let me carry you." Rama and Laxmana complied and Hanumana, the son of the Wind, took the air route.

Freindship With Sugreeva

After landing on Rishyamook hill top, Hanumana put up the guests in a beautiful garden. Then he flew off to bring Sugreeva from Malay Hillocks.

Sugreeva sat in a cave with his trusted friends. He always lived in fear of his brother, Bali's agents. Hanumana put him at ease by reporting, "O King, There is no cause for fear. It is good news. Come and meet the valiant and invincible, Lord Rama. He has come with his younger brother, Laxmana. They are descendants of Ikshvaku Dynasty."

Sugreeva came to the garden where the brothers were put up. Hanumana introduced them to each other and to the situations they were in.

When Sugreeva learnt that Lord Rama and Laxmana were in need of his help in the search for Sita, he was delighted. It was a matter of pride for him.

He said, "O Lord! It is your great generosity to give this humble apeman an opportunity to serve you. I know that it is I who will be really benefitted by our association."

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Sugreeva's endearing words made Rama embrace him.

Then, Sugreeva told his story. Lord Rama promised him the protection from his fears. Hanumana made a holy fire and the alliance between Lord Rama and Sugreeva was formally solemnised. Taking the oath of friendship, Sugreeva announced, "From this moment I am your friend, O Lord. Your problem will be my problem. I will leave no stone unturned in searching out Mother Sita."

Lord Rama said in choked voice, "O Monkey King! In the presence of this holy fire, I promise you that I will destroy your evil brother, Bali who has stolen your throne and your wife."

This made Sugreeva extremely happy and confident. Now it was the turn of Lord Rama to tell Sugreeva about his problem, the entire tragedy of Sita's abduction. And Sugreeva remembered something and remarked, "Oh yes, My Lord! One day I saw a chariot flying overhead in which sat a multi-headed demon. He was holding a woman who was crying and calling, 'Lord Rama! Laxmana!' Lord, It was Sita, now I can say for sure. She threw away some ornaments too. My people picked those items up and we have kept them safely. I will show them to you. "Sugreeva went inside a cave and came back with a bundle of ornaments.

Lord Rama at once recognised those familiar items. Those were Sita's, no doubt.

Then Sugreeva said, "O Lord! That chariot flew southwards. I will send some of my brave soldiers in that direction."

"Later. First, let me solve your problem and make you fearless. Let's go to Kishkindhapur, your capital."

Sugreeva and Hanumana began making preparations

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for the move.

The next day, they moved to the dense forest of Kishkindha. Lord Rama had told his plan to Sugreeva And according to the plan, Sugreeva went to the palace of Bali to challenge him for a duel. Rama himself hid behind a tree some distance away.

Sugreeva drew out Bali from his palace and managed to bring him at the spot selected. A fierce battle began. Bali was very powerful and Sugreeva was at the receiving end. But he battled on in the hope that Rama would kill Bali with his arrow any moment. But Rama did not do anything. No arrow was shot by him.

At last, to save his life, Sugreeva ran away from the fight.

Somehow, he managed to reach where Lord Rama stood. He complained, "O Lord! Why didn't you shoot your arrow at Bali? He was beating the daylights out of me and you just watched."

"O Dear Sugreeva! You two brothers are so alike physically that 1 could not differentiate from this distance. I could take no chance," so explaining Rama took off the garland from his neck and put it on Sugreeva and added, "Keep this garland on. It will help me know who is Bali and who is you. Go and challenge him to fight again."

Sugreeva hesitated. He was afraid that Bali would kill him if Rama again missed to shoot. Lord Rama understood his fears and assured him, "Friend! Do not have any doubts. He is dead this time. Believe it."

And Sugreeva did likewise. At hearing the challenge of Sugreeva for refight, Bali came out in raging mood. He declared, "Lowly Coward! This time I am going to kill you."

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A heavy battle began between them.

Bali was hitting hard and Sugreeva was under pressure.

But before Bali could bring down the death blow, Rama shot arrow from behind the cover of the tree. The arrow went through the chest of Bali making a hole in his heart. Bali fell down with a painful cry.

Lord Rama and Laxmana came to the fallen Bali and knelt down beside him. Rama gently placed Bali's head in his lap and made comforting sounds. Bali groaned a question, "O Lord! Why did you have to kill me from a hiding place? What wrong had I done to you?"

Lord Rama reasoned, "Dear Bali! One who casts an evil eye on the wife of a younger brother, sister, daughter-in-law or daughter, deserves to die. There is nothing wrong in killing such person."

"I see. Forgive my mistakes, O Lord. Take me into your fold."

Lord Rama raised his hand in the blessing gesture and Bali peacefully breathed his last. The heaven was his abode now. After the funeral rites of Bali, Rama declared Sugreeva as the King of Kishkindha and his son, Angada as the Crown Prince. Lord Rama was requested to move into the capital city to take part in the formal crowning ceremonies but he refused. He said that he would not move into a city or a palace before the exile period was over. He sent Laxmana to oversee the crowning ceremony of Sugreeva.

Laxmana went into Kishkindha city and himself put crown on the head of Sugreeva in a befitting ceremony. Wild celebrations followed.

After becoming king, Sugreeva indulged himself in all kinds of merrymaking and fun. He forgot his promise given

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to Lord Rama. For days he didn't even go to meet Rama and pay his respects. One day, Hanumana said to him, "O King! Forgive me for saying that you are letting power go to your head. Merrymaking is taking all your time. You forget that all this power has been gifted to you by Lord Rama and you have forgotten him."

This brought Sugreeva to his senses. He realised his mistake and apologized, "I am sorry, Hanumana. I had lost my head. I even forgot my moral duty. Dear Hanumana, send messengers to all the directions and find out where Sita is. We must move fast."

"As you wish," said Hanumana and went away. He sent out messengers and agents without any delay. Then, he came back to the king Sugreeva and they went to pay a visit to Lord Rama. All the ministers also accompanied them. Rama was very pleased to see them. He spoke, "Dear friend Sugreeva! You are dear to me like my brother Bharata. Now I request you to do something to search out my Sita."

"O Lord! The agents have been sent to all places. But as Ravana had been seen going southwards, we must make special efforts in that direction. So, the team of Jamwanta, Hanumana, Nal, Neel and Angada, assisted by an army of daring monkeys will scout that area. We have to find Mother Sita at all costs." Lord Rama gave Hanumana his ring and said, "Dear Hanumana! Something makes me believe that you are the one who will get me news of my Sita. Keep my ring. This ring will serve as a proof of your being my messenger."

"As you order, My Lord," Hanumana spoke taking the ring from Rama. All the monkey soldiers set out on their mission of seeking out Sita.

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Only a few old and sick monkeys remained back in Kiskindha.

The monkeys spread over the places. There was no forest where monkeys were not looking for Sita. The biggest band was moving southwards under the leadership of Jamwanta. It was like a brown army leaping over mountains, crossing rivers and flying through forests spreading in the direction of south. Every nook, corner, cave, ravine, tree hollow or lagoon was being checked. It was an arduous task but the monkey soldiers were braving it. No one was caring about one's own comforts. They were surviving only on wild fruits and edible roots. They worked all day and slept or rested during a few dark hours of the night. It had become a routine since they had left their home. There would be no relief till their search led to Sita.

But the days of hectic search yielded no positive result.

Many of the monkey soldiers were losing hope. One day, the lead group of monkeys sat down to discuss the situation.

An old vulture, named Sampati saw them. For him they were God sent food as many of them looked sick and tired, ready to die. So, he paid attention to them.

Hanumana was telling others the tragic story of Lord Rama. There was also the mention of Jatayu. And Sampati got a shock when Hanumana narrated how Jatayu was killed while trying to save Sita from the clutches of Havana.

Sampati called out, "O Monkey Soldiers! Who are you and what is about Sita and Ravana you talk about? I am Jatayu's brother Sampati."

Jamwanta greeted him with folded hands and informed, "O Vulture King! Sita is the wife of Lord Rama who is the son of the late king Dasharatha of Ayodhya. Sita has been

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abducted by demon Ravana. He killed your brother as well. Our king Sugreeva has sent us to find the whereabouts of Mother Sita. Do you know anything about it?"

Sampati grieved for the death of his brother and spoke, "Had 1 not been too old I would have gone to Lanka to kill that evil Ravana. O Valiant Monkeys! That demon Ravana is the king of Lanka island to which place Sita has been taken."

This definite information excited the monkeys. They ran towards the sea and reached the coast soon.

But the endless expanse of sea dampened their spirits.

"It is impossible to cross the sea," a monkey moaned.

Jamwanta came to the monkeys who were discussing the problem, the sea posed. He said, "We have to find a solution to this problem."

The group was joined by Nal, Neel and Angada.

They too nulled over the problem.

Angada remarked, "It can be crossed only by leaping over it. Who can do it?"

"The one with a very long long long leap."

The faces of the monkeys fell.

They were in dilemma. The marching ahead meant death by drowning. And going back meant defeat which was worse than death.

"The death looks inevitable. Had Lanka been 300 Yojana (Yojana was ancient distance measurement unit) distance away I could've made it. But it is much more than that," Nal lamented.

Neel claimed, "400Yojanas is my leap."

"Not enough. I have a range of 500 which also falls too short," Angada said in a sad voice and added, "Isn't there

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no such mightly monkey amongst us who can save us from the death of shame?"

"Don't give up hope, Angada. By the grace of Lord Rama some solution would emerge," Jamwant spoke looking towards Hanumana who sat on a hillock in gloomy mood. Suddenly, something came to the mind of Jamwanta and he approached Hanumana to say, "O Son of the Wind god! What do you think? You have the power to get us out of the present difficulty. You can fly through the air over the ocean. Then, why so silent? Don't you have any idea of your power?"

Hanumana sat still as if puzzled.

Jamwanta exhorted him," O Valiant Hanumana! Once you had put the sun in your mouth taking it for a juicy fruit and there was darkness spread all over. You can leap into the deep space. Leaping over this sea should be a joke for you. O Brave Hanumana! You are as mightly as the king Sugreeva and as glorious as Rama or Laxmana! No one can match you in power, speed, wisdom and forbearance. O Mightly Monkey! Why don't you show us how easily you can overfly the sea?"

Hanumana still sat unmoved.

Jamwanta continued, "O Almighty Hanumana! No task is impossible for you, brother. You have taken birth to serve Lord Rama. Wake up your sleeping powers of lightning speed, frightening might and blinding brilliance. Wake up and conquer the sea."

In this way, Jamwanta tried to fire the incredible dormant powers of Hanumana. Due to a curse such powers remained forgotten inside Hanumana. They required waking up.

Suddenly, he got charged up. He sprang up and his body expanded to the proportions of a mountain. His face lit up.

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Hanumana enquired from Jamwanta about the task required to be performed by him. Jamwant briefed him, "O Son of Wind! You have to go to Lanka and bring the information of Mother Sita. Then Lord Rama will destroy eveil demon Ravana and liberate Mother Sita."

Hanumana got on top of the Mahendra mountain in one leap. He gave a cry of "Jai Shri Rama" and sailed through the air with a monkey squeal.

The eyes of Angada welled up at seeing Hanumana streaking over the ocean. He said, "Brother! Till Hanumana comes back with some news about Mother Sita, we shall be on tenterhooks."

"No need to dispair, Prince," Jamwanta assured him, "1 have full faith in the power of Hanumana. He will bring some solid news."

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Fifth Chapter

SUNDER KANDA

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Fascinating Episode

Hanumana leapt towards Lanka. On the way giant Sursa tested his intelligence.' Singhika was killed by Hanumana, At the gate of Lanka, he dealt punch to demoness Lankini. Thus, he gave sample of his power to her and the message that destruction of demons was just a matter of time. He searched several homes to locate Sita without success. Then, he met a Rama devotee in the form of Vibhishana who showed Hanumana the way to go to Sita. When Hanumana reached at Ashoka garden where Sita was imprisoned, he found Ravana terrorising her. After his departure, Hanumana showed himself to Sita and introduced himself. He gave the message of Rama to overjoyed Sita. To satisfy his hunger, Hanumana went on a rampage in the gardens destroying the trees. He beat away many demon stalwarts. At last Ravana's son, Megnath was able to capture him, Ravana ordered Hanumana tail to be turned into a torch. He ran around with his tail on fire and set fire too many palaces and buildings of Lanka. Lanka was literally on fire. Then, Hanumana returned to Lord Rama with the message of Sita. After assessing the situation Rama set out for Lanka with Sugreeva's monkey army to wage battle agonist Ravana's evil empire. Vibhishana also joined their camp. It was decided to build a bridge across the sea to get the army on the shores of Lanka. Nal and Neel undertook the task for construction of the bridge with a novel idea.

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Hanumana on Way to Lanka

Meanwhile, Hanumana was speeding over the sea. Suddenly, a high mountain peak emerged out of the sea to block the passage of Hanumana and spoke, "O Son of the Wind! I am Mainak mountain. You can take a rest on me because you have a long way to go."

"O King of Mounts! I am on Lord Rama's mission which is too urgent to afford rest. Thank you anyway." He touched the mountain for good Luck. The mountain returned to the sea bottom. Hanumana speeded on at faster pace.

Test by Sursa

Hanumana had covered a little more distance when a new trouble arose before him. A gargantuan demoness appeared before him. She was the mother of snakes, Sursa, sent by heavenly gods to test the capability of Hanumana. She posed as if to swallow Hanumana. He prayed to her, "O Mother! I go on Lord's mission. Please eat me when I return this way." Sursa did not agree and opened her mouth. Hanumana at once reduced himself to the size of an insect. Then he buzzed in and flew out in a flash. He said, "O Mother! I fulfilled your wish to get into your mouth. Now, allow me to go."

Sursa was very pleased with the intelligent act of Hanumana and blessed him, "O Hanumana! You are very clever. Fit for the service of Lord Rama. I bless you, Son." With these words Sursa disappeared.

Singhika Slaughter

Hanumana resumed his journey. A new hurdle was waiting for him further ahead. That area was the zone of a terror striking demoness, Singhika. She could eat the reflection of

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any creature flying overhead that got cast in the water. She mistook Hanumana for some giant bird in flight and started hungrily eating his reflection.

Hanumana cried in mid flight as he felt tearing pain. He looked down and understood the reason upon spotting Singhika. When she tried to swallow him, Hanumana kicked her mouth but got swallowed in. It enraged Hanumana so much that he tore the belly of the demoness and came out. He got on his way again after putting Singhika, thus, on her way to hell.

Hanumana in Lanka

Riding the tides of all the problems, Hanumana reached the city of Lanka, at last. It was strictly and heavily guarded.

After assessing the situation, Hanumana decided to enter the city in the darkness of the night. He again reduced himself to a mosquito size and tried to fly in but a guard, named Lankini, was alert and she cought him. Hanumana landed a mighty punch on her face and knocked her down. She folded her hands humbly and revealed, "O Mightly Monkey Man! When Lord Brahma, the creator, gave a boon to Ravana, he had warned that the day I get hit by a monkey messenger of Lord Rama, we should know that the end of the demons has come. O Big Brother! That day has arrived. Lucky of me to meet the messenger of the Lord."

The demoness guard, Lankini gave way to Hanumana and thus, he got into the enemy citadel.

Vibhishana Discovered

Hanumana scouted the entire city and he investigated even Ravana's palace but Sita was not sighted. Then he looked

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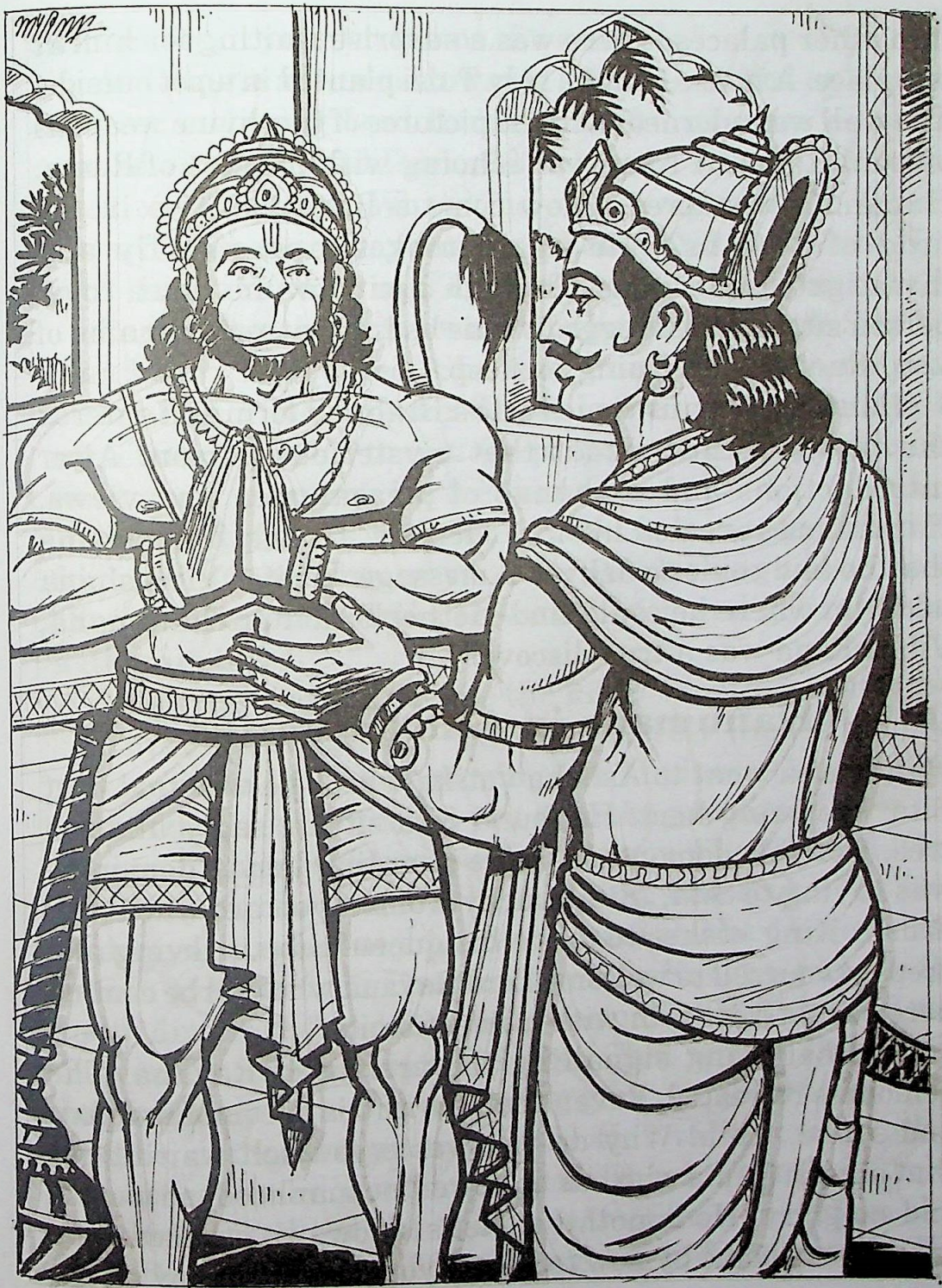

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into other palaces. There was a surprise waiting for him at one place. A house had the holy Tulsi planted in a pot outside. The wall was adorned with the pictures of the divine weapons of Lord Rama. A room was echoing with prayers of Rama. Hanuman wandered, "How come a Rama devotee in the land of demons?" He again took shape of a fly and investigated the rooms. Through a window, he saw a royal person sitting cross legged on his bed, chanting the name of Lord Rama before going to sleep.

Hanumana transformed into a Brahmin form and entered the room to know about that mysterious person. After introductions and exchange of pleasantries and views, Hanumana revealed his iruc identity. He told Vibhishana that he had come to deliver a message to Sita. Vibhishana told him where he could find Mother Sita. For Hanumana, Vibhishana was a true discovery.

Hanumana in Ashoka Vatika

Hanumana went to Ashoka vatika where he was told that Sita was being kept. He found Sita sitting sadly under a tree. Horrible demonesses were guarding her. A demoness was saying to Sita, "Sita! Lucky woman you are whom our demon King wishes to make his queen! Stop grieving and prepare yourself to welcome Lord Ravana who will be coming here soon. Greet him with a sweet smile."

The bell rang signalling the arrival of Ravana. The demoness retreated. Ravana came with his queen Mandodari and spoke, "Sita! Why do you waste yourself waiting for that ascetic Rama who has no power, no manhood, no wealth and no glory. He is nothing. He is a coward, otherwise he would have come by now to rescue you. Becoming my queen

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will solve all your problems. Be sensible."

As Ravana advanced towards Sita, she picked up a straw and remembering Lord Rama, used the straw as a barrier and retorted, "Sinful Demon! You played a lowly and mean trick to abduct me. What kind of bravery is that? What a coward! You ran away from my Rama and Laxmana. Now your time is running out. They will come to send you to hell."

Ravana lost his temper and prepared to assault Sita but Mandodari intervened. She held him back. Ravana gave ultimatum, "Fool woman Sita!!, I give you one month to surrender yourself to me. Or prepare to die!" The demon went away stomping his feet in anger.

After Ravana's departure, the demonesses tried to frighten Sita in many ways. A horrible looking one advised. "You must agree to king Ravana's wish and get rewarded with happiness."

"How dare you challenge the king?" another said.

Third one suggested, "The king merely wishes to make you a queen. You are abusing his kindness. Marry him. Otherwise he may thrash you to make you agree!!.

Just then, an old demoness came there. She rebuked other demonesses. She was of religious kind. She spoke, "I saw a strange dream last night. An ape came and he destroyed the demon army and our Lanka. I saw king Ravana going in the south direction on a donkey. He was naked and his head was shaven. Such dream is a bad sign. That is why I warn you not to harass Sita. She will bring great troubles to us."

The demoness was Trijata. Her talk scared other demonesses who went away from there. Trijata consoled Sita and asked her not to lose heart. She was certain that something in favour of Sita was going to happen soon. Her

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talk greatly comforted Sita.

Then, Sita started wondering, "Why Lord Rama has not come to my rescue? Has he forgotten me? I can't bear the terror of demons any longer. If no help comes for some more time, I shall take my life." She prayed to the tree, "O Ashoka! You understand my shocking plight. Rain down fire to give me release from my misery!"

Hanumana was watching this scene from a tree a little distance away. He now came on the Ashoka tree and started softly singing the story of Lord Rama, all about his life and the tragedies including his present mood of pining for Sita after losing her.

Rama hymn puzzled Sita so much that she ramained still like a statue listening to it.

At last her tongue moved, "O Brother! Who sings that hymn in the land of demons? Is it just an imagination of a sad woman or reality? Come into my sight if you are real."

Hanumana jumped down to land infront of Sita.

He spoke with his hands folded, "Mother! It is me, the messenger of Lord Rama! My name is Hanumana. He has sent me in your search,"

Sita looked scared. It could be a demon trick.

Hanumana guessed her fears and assured, "Do not have any doubts about what I said, Mother. Lord Rama gave me his ring to show you as a proof my being his true messenger. See it and trust me." He respectfully offered the ring to Sita who took it at once.

Sita felt and looked at the ring with loving care.

She asked in anxious voice, "Hanumana! How is my Lord Rama? How is brother Laxmana? Are they alright?"

"Mother! They are alright in health but their hearts are

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bleeding for you. They are unhappy and very sad. Now that I have found you out, the news will greatly ease their tensions. Mother, please don't give up hope and show a little patience for little time more. These demons are going to suffer for their sins. Lord Rama will surely come to destroy them and liberate you. He and Laxmana followed by a great army of our monkeys will wage a war against the demons. The Lord is invincible. You know that. Your troubles are almost over, Mother."

The words of Hanumana and the news of Rama and Laxmana comforted Sita. But a doubt troubled her, "Hanumana! Your army must consist of small monkeys like you. How will you face these huge and mighty demons?"

"Mother! Don't go by our small sizes. Our army has mighty and brave soldiers. Just watch my real battle size," Hanumana expanded his body to grow into gigantic proportions which could dwarf any demon.

Sita watched him open mouthed.

Now she had no doubts about her liberation from the demons. She blessed Hanumana, "Be immortal and invincible."

Suddenly, Hanumana realised that he was hungry. In his expanded form he had become tree-tall and had seen the juicy fruits dangling on the trees. He said, Mother! I have not eaten for a long time. There are nice fruits on those trees around here. My favourite food. I wish to eat some if you kindly permit me."

"But Hanumana! There are a lot of demon guards around. If they catch you then it will mean trouble. They will kill you or hurt you."

"Mother! Don't worry about that. With your kind blessing I can face any number of these demons and outsmart them,"

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Hanumana assured her with a smile. Then he bowed to her and raced into the garden of fruit trees.

He ate to his heart's content. Full belly sent him in a mood of some fun and frolicking. He started breaking branches and uprooting trees. The demon guards got alerted by sounds of rampage. They found a monkey doing damage to the garden and went after it. In ensuing battle Hanumana killed several demon guards. Panicked demons ran away to report to the court of Lanka.

In the court, Havana was informed, "O King! A monkey has invaded the royal garden. It is destroying the trees and ruining the garden. And several guards have been killed by it."

Ravana asked his younger son Akshay Kumar to go with the guards and catch the offending monkey. The monkey was to be brought to the court.

Hanumana dealt crushing blows to Ravana's son and his soldiers. He uprooted trees and tossed them on the enemies. Akshay Kumar and many of his demon soldiers got killed crushed down by the trees. The terrified surviving soldiers and guards ran to the court of Ravana to give the disturbing news.

They reported, "O King! You won't believe how powerful that monkey is. The Prince Akshay Kumar and many soldiers have lost their lives."

"What?" Ravana thundered and sprang up from his throne, "Akshay Kumar got killed? A monkey killed my son! That is impossible. A monkey?"

"It is true, O King!"

Ravana turned to his mighty son, Megnad, "Megnad! Go and get that monkey. Catch it alive and show me what

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kind of monkey it is that kills my son."

Megnad went into the garden along with his soldiers.

Again, Hanumana played death games with demons. He picked several of them and tossed them like stones. Some got trampled upon or kicked away. This sent Megnad into rage. He shot arrows at him but they made no impression on Hanumana. He continued to play havoc and mocked at them. Then Megnad used his ultimate weapon, Brahmastra on the enemy. It overpowered Hanumana and he fell down.

Hanumana could have escaped from that weapon as he had a boon to overcome it but he preferred to save it for some other time. And the bigger reason was that he wanted to meet Ravana and see his court.

As soon as Hanumana was tied in Brahmastra bonds, Megnad ordered to his soldiers, "Take it to the king."

Hanumana was made to get up and walk. Surrounded by the demon soldiers he marched towards the court of Ravana. Megnad, the Indra victor, was hailed by his soldiers and other demons. Slogans in his praise were raised. And Hanumana was duly produced before the demon king Ravana.

Ravana arched his brows and barked, "O mean Monkey! The filthy creature! Who are you and where do you come from? Why did you destroy my beautiful garden? Don't you know my powers, huh?"

Ravana on his throne was at much higher level than Hanumana who stood on the floor below. Hanumana, using his divine will power, elongated his tail to coil it into a high seat to sit on and spoke, "Let me tell you who I am. I am Hanumana, the minister of the monkey king Sugreeva and the messenger of Lord Rama. O King of Lanka! Till now you enjoyed the fruits of some good deeds done but

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soon you will pay for your sins. If you want to escape the wrath of Rama, take Mother Sita respectfully to Lord Rama and seek his forgiveness."

This sermon from Hanumana pushed Ravana into a foul mood. He growled, "Don't preach me, you miserable monkey! That's no way to talk to the Lord of Lanka. It is unpardonable misbehaviour. Death is the right punishment for it. Soldiers! Take him away and slay him."

This shocked Vibhishana who was present there. He intervened with reasons, "O King! By allowing him in our court and letting him make a statement, we have accepted his status as a messenger or envoy of the king Sugreeva And rules don't allow killing a messenger or envoy. You can give him some other punishment.

Ravana conceded, "Alright, Don't kill him. Damage his tail to teach him a lesson. Monkeys love their tails. Torch his tail and let him go. That will serve as an example for all the monkeys."

Hanumana did not look frightened or worried. He just smiled. The soldiers moved forward and tried to push down Hanumana who was high up on his tail. The demons failed to bring him down. Even efforts to uncoil the tail did not work. The drama went on for a long time to the embarrassment of Ravana. At last, Hanumana himself jumped down and shortened his tail. The soldiers led him out of the court. Oil soaked long strips of cloth were tied to the end of Hanumana's tail and is was set on fire. A crowd of demons clapped and laughed as they found the scene very amusing.

With tail burning like a torch, Hanumana jumped around. Some demons started beating drums to add to the fun. Suddenly, Hanumana took a mightly leap and landed on

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the balcony of the upper floor of a building setting it on fire. He jumped on over the roof tops setting more fires. Soon there were fires everywhere. Ravana's Lanka was burning.

From a rooftop, giant size Hanumana let out a thundering laughter.

This sight frightened the demons out of their wits. All those rounds of demon laughters and drum beats had died down. Now, there was horror on every demon face. They were running around, weeping and crying at the loss the raging fires were causing all over.

A demon moaned, "I knew that monkey was no ordinary creature. It was something else in monkey guise."

Hanumana was really looking like an illusion. This moment he appeared on one roof top and the next moment he was on a roof hundreds of houses away.

Lanka had become a virtual hell. In this hell there was a little heaven also. That was the house of Vibhishana which was very carefully spared by Hanumana and cooled by the love for Lord Rama.

Now, Hanumana flew towards the sea and dipped his tail in the water to put out the fire. He again visited Sita and asked for some token for Lord Rama and the permission to leave. Sita gave him her remaining bracelet and said, "O Son Hanumana! Tell Rama to do something. For me every moment here is like an age in hell."

Hanumana assured her of liberty and departed.

Meanwhile, Rama, Laxmana and Sugreeva sat together in a forest near Kishkindha.

The parties gone to North, West and East had returned and admitted their failure to trace Sita anywhere. This had

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worried everyone. Lord Rama remarked, "Now our hopes rest solely on the team gone to South. If they too come back with no news of Sita then...."

"No Lord. Don't lose hope. I am confident that the South team will return with some results," Sugreeva said hopefully.

On the other side, Hanumana had returned to his team. His mates sat gloomly. The news that Hanumana brought made everyone jump with joy. Sita had been traced out and their efforts had born fruit. After a long time there was smile on the faces of Jamwanta, Nal, Neel, Angada and others. All of them, at once set out for Kishkindha making happy chatter and with renewed energy.

As soon as Laxmana noticed a monkey coming towards them in long leaps his face brightened up. He exclaimed, "Brother Look! A monkey comes running. May be, he got some news about the sister-in-law."

Sugreeva recognised the monkey, "Oh! It's Dadhimukh, the guard of Madhuban garden."

The guard monkey reported after paying obeisance, "Master! The Prince Angada, Hanumana and their friends have raided Madhuban garden and ruined it. They are acting like crazy."

This report pleased Sugreeva greatly.

He said in excited voice, "Lord! The mad acts of this group tells me that they have come back with success story. I am sure. Dear Dadhimukh! Don't stop them. Let them eat and frolick around. They are mad with joy."

"As you wish," said the guard and went back.

After a short while, Jamwanta and party reached there in jubiliant mood.

They paid their respects to Lord Rama, Laxmana and

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Sugreeva. Jamwanta narrated how Hanumana flew over the sea. And then, Hanumana told them about his Lanka experience.

Lord Rama gratefully accepted the bracelet given by Sita.

The bracelet and the news of Sita's plight brought tears to the eyes of Rama.

Hanumana said, "O Lord! She lives by your name only."

"Hanumana! I will always remain indebted to you for this service to me. How can I reward you! Nothing in this world is precious enough to repay this debt."

"O Lord Rama! If you really want to reward me, then I ask for one thing only. Let me be devoted to you forever single mindedly," Hanumana prayed with folded hands and bowed his head humbly.

Lord Rama blessed him.

After blessing Hanumana, Rama turned to Sugreeva, "Friend! Prepare to march to Lanka. I can't let Sita rot in that place any longer. Evil Ravana must be destroyed as soon as possible."

Sugreeva summoned his commander Neel and instructed, "Commander, prepare the army for the march at once. If possible, we shall like to depart today itself."

"Shall be done," said Neel and went away to ready his army. The army got ready for the move and it set out headed by Lord Rama, Laxmana, Sugreeva and other stalwarts.

The slogans hailing Rama and for his victoiy rant the air. Some overzealous and devoted warriors carried Rama and Laxmana on their shoulders wherever possible on the way.

With the grace of Rama, the army reached the shores in due time. Rama stood on the shore and looked towards the

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horizon where the earth and the sky appeared to meet. Sugreeva, Hanumana and others stood beside him.

Rama said in worried tone, "Friend Sugreeva! The sea looks endless. We must think of a way to overcome it. Otherwise how shall our army land on Lanka soil?"

"Rightly said, O Lord! We must camp here and think over it. I am sure we shall find some solution."

The sea waves were rolling in high tides with a terrific noise and rumble as if to frighten the monkey army. The waves crashed on the rocks with great splashes creating clouds of mist. As the moon came up, the tides rose higher and higher creating deafening sound. It was really terror striking.

Coronation of Vibhishana

Lord Rama and his associates were in a meeting to think of some way to cross the sea when Laxmana happened to look up towards the sky over the sea. He spoke in a surprised voice, "Brother! Brother! Look, demons are coming to swoop down on us."

Everyone looked up in alarm. But Hanumana recognised the demons and he announced, "O Lord! They are your devotees, not enemies."

The flying demons were Vibhishana and his aids. After landing, Vibhishana's folded hands touched the feet of Lord Rama. He spoke, "Lord Rama! I am your humble servant and unfortunately brother of Ravana, named Vibhishana. Lord, I tried my best to persuade my evil brother to return Mother Sita to your service and to seek your pardon. But he seems determined to stay on the path of evil and injustice. For my good advice, he kicked and expelled me from the

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court. So, I could no more live in that evil empire of sins. I took liberty to leave Lanka to seek shelter at the feet of your kindness. I beg you to accept me."

Before Rama could react, the monkey king Sugreeva whispered to him, "Friend! I suspect this to be some trick of Ravana. May be, he has sent him to serve as a spy inside our camp to find out our secrets. I suggest that we get rid of him as soon as possible."

"No, friend Sugreeva. It will be against the principles of our Raghu Dynasty. We don't dishonour a refuge seeker." And then, Rama said to Vibhishana, "Dear Vibhishana! Welcome to our fold."

Then Rama and Vibhishana talked for a long time and Rama learned many secrets of Ravana's strengths and weakneses. He said, "Friend Vibhishana! Don't worry about you brother Ravana. The sin of adbucting Sita will get him punishment. He can't hide in any hole anywhere in the three worlds. Consider him dead. I, Rama, the son of the late king Dashratha of Ayodhya, declare you as the King of Lanka Island."

Saying so, Rama applied tilak with sea water on the forehead of Vibhishana. All those present hailed provisional coronation of Vibhishana.

After this symbolic ceremony, Rama asked from Vibhishana, "O King of Lanka! Tell us the best way to cross the sea to reach your kingdom."

"Lord! At the hour of dawn, worship the sea and invoke Sea god to give you the way. He will certainly extend his help and cooperation to you."

The next morning, at dawn, Lord Rama worshipped Sea and prayed, "O Sea god! Kindly give way to my army to

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land on the other side of your shoreline."

At the end of the prayer, Rama sat down on grass mat to wait for the response. Three days passed and nothing happened. No reply. Lord Rama lost his cool. He got up and said to Laxmana. "Brother Laxmana! Politeness and humiltiy does not always succeed. Sometimes arm twisting is required. Get me my bow and fire arrow. I will send all sea water up in steam. Sea god has grown too big an ego. A condition where peace, simplicity, requests and forgiveness don't work."

Laxamana was already angry at Sea for its adamance. He quickly handed bow and the arrow to Rama. The angry Rama put the arrow to the bow string.

Meanwhile, the sea creatures panicked. The water churned violently and Sea god appeared. With folded hands it spoke, "O Lord! Forgive me for my shortcomings. My grace is your gift to me. You can steam me up and your army will march across but it will destroy my honour. I can not go against you. I will do as you wish me to."

Lord Rama smiled. He said, "You are right, Brother. I won't destroy your honour. Just tell me, how does my monkey army get across you?"

Bridge Across the Sea

The Sea god revealed, "Lord! There are two monkeys in your army. They are brothers, Nal and Neel. They have some divine gift. Any stone they place on water with their hands, starts floating. You can get them to make a bridge of floating stones." And Sea god disappeared into the waters.

Lord Rama commissioned Nal and Neel to build the bridge.

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Sugreeva commanded his army to provide labour service.

The entire monkey army got busy in quarrying and cutting stones into flat slates. In a short time the sea shore began getting lined up with piles of stone slates. Everyone there was in a hectic activity.

Nal and Neel got busy doing their part of job. They went on placing slates on the sea water giving shape to a make shift bridge. It looked like a wide garden path against the blue sea.

The task was completed in fast time.

Lord Rama thanked and blessed Nal and Neel for their good work and he praised all the monkeys for their dedicated labour.

Rama said to Sugreeva, "Friend! Before embarking on the Lanka expedition, I would like to seek blessings of Lord Shiva."

He made a lingam with sand and worshipped it.

At the command of Sugreeva the monkey army began its march over the bridge. The monkeys were raising the slogans of "Jai Shri Rama." They were so full of energy and zest that jostling and pushing one another was a common scene all along. Their happy shrieks were frightening away the sea creatures. It appeared as if a river of noise was flowing over the sea rumble. It took a long time to get the entire army on the shores of Lanka. Before the arrival of the Rama's army the colour of the Lanka coast was grey. Now it was monkey-pink.

After consultation with Rama, Sugreeva ordered his army to populate a nearby mountain on which grew a forest of fruit trees.

Then, things quietened down for a lull before the storm.

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Sixth Chapter

LANKA KANDA

•

Ravana refused to pay heed to his Queen Mandodari 's advice for peace. He could not believe that an army of tribals, mendicants and monkeys could harm him. Lanka was under seize of Rama's monkey forec. The war began. Ravana started losing his stalwarts. He himself came into the battle field to face Rama besides waking up his ever-asleep brother warrior, Kumbhakarna who wrought have on monkeys. Rama himself had to vanquish him. Ravana's son, Megnad went into war with his army. Vibhishana revealed the powers of Megnad on Rama and Laxmana. Megnad put Laxmana to sleep with a special weapon. Hanumana had to bring a divine herbal plant to revive Laxmana. Laxmana challenged Megnad again and this time he finished the enemy. The demon army was using all kinds of black magic, sorcery and hypnotic illusions to outwit monkey soldiers. But Rama and Laxmana managed to deal with those tricks, Ravana descended to wage the final battle. His ferocity frightened the monkeys. Nothing was working against Ravana. Vibhishana again came to Rama's rescue by telling him about the soft underbelly of Ravana. Then, Rama was able to cut down the demon king to end his evil empire. Gods smiled. The demon queens wailed. Vibhishana performed the last rites of his dead family members. Vibhishana formally became the King of Lanka. Rama accepted back Sita after fire test. And Rama and party returned to Ayodhya to a heroic welcome as the exile period had also come to an end.

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Ravana's Illusiontrick

The spies of Ravana were relaying news about Rama and his army to him, every hour. The spies had seen some divine signs of Rama's invincibility in the monkey army camp. When Ravana was told about them, he just scoffed at his agents and ordered them to stop imagining stupid things.

Then, Ravana called a demon who was expert in creating hypnotic illusion things. And after giving some instructions to him, Ravana proceeded to Ashoka garden.

He spoke to Sita, "Sita! The tribal you are waiting for will never come. Yesterday, our brave army attacked your man's monkey force and destroyed it. Our soldiers have brought back severed heads of Rama and Laxmana as a proof. You must see it."

Ravana clapped his hands and the expert demon appeared with illusion created heads of Rama and Laxmana. Ravana threw the heads before Sita and said, "See?"

"Oh Rama!" a grief stricken Sita fell down and wailed bitterly. All her hopes died instantly.

The demon King guffawed in triumph and departed.

Sita wailed, sobbed, cried and wept for a long time, wishing to dissolve herself in tears. Suddenly, Trijata came there and consolingly whispered, "Dear daughter, Don't get fooled. It is merely a hypnotic illusion. Killing Rama and Laxmana is not that easy, I know for sure that they are very safe and alive and sitting pretty in their camp. Believe me."

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"Really?" Sita stopped sobbing.

"Quite really, daughter. I went there stealthily and saw them with my own eyes. They are wonderful and mighty. Now, Ravana's days are numbered. This stupid king of ours will cause the destruction of Lanka and of all the demons. It's inevitable, I am convinced."

Meanwhile, Rama and the monkey army announced the start of the war by blowing conchshells.

The Prayer of Mandodari

When Ravana reached back into his palace, his queen Mandodari tried to give him wise counsel. She sat at his feet and prayed, "O Lord of My Heart! I have heard that Rama and Laxmana are no ordinary human beings. They are incarnations of gods. Making them enemies will bring us only destruction and misery. I request you to kindly hand over Sita to Lord Rama and avoid war. It is never too late. They will forget about everything and you will continue to rule Lanka. Or I shudder to even imagine...."

But Ravana was beyond any reasoning or wise advice. He turned down his queen's request and marched to the meeting of the war mongerers.

Soon, he was addressing the meeting of the ministers of his war council.

He spoke, "I have already been told about all the rubbish of Rama's powers, bravery and the act of crossing the sea. They are all figments of imaginations of the coward minds. We must not give any weight to those rumours. Our own power is invincible. We believe in ourselves."

An old wisened minister, Malyavan said, "I have no doubts about the bravery of our warriors, O King. But here

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is question of political wisdom and rules. We must not unnecessarily make enemies of persons who are equal or greater in power. I think we should surrender Sita and make a peace pact with Rama."

"What the hell you say, Malyavan!" Ravana thundered shaking in anger, "How dare you equate that half naked tribal with me? And the joke is that he has come to make war with me with the help of a bunch of monkeys! These tribal brothers and monkeys won't be allowed to go back alive. That is final."

Ravana had lost his head.

Any attempt to put some sense in him by anyone was useless.

He was paying heed to only war mongering ministers, who were mad just like him. The wise and the sensible ministers were being ignored or plainly getting rebuked. Lanka was getting fortified with commanders taking up their respective posts and positions.

Prahasta was stationed at the East Gate. The West Gate was defended by Meghnad. Shooka and Sarna guarded the North Gate, and the warrior Mahapasharva took charge of the South Gate. Then Ravana arrogantly announced, "Now I will survey the monkey army from the roof of my palace."

From the roof top he looked towards the sea where on shore, Rama and the monkey army was camping.

Meanwhile, on the otherside, Rama, Laxmana, Sugreeva and some others were atop the hill, taking a look at fortified Lanka. Hanumana spotted Ravana on his roof top. The ten headed demon was easy to recognise from a great distance. Hanumana exclaimed, "O Lord! Look, Ravana is surveying our army."

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The sight of Ravana filled Sugreeva with great hatred. He leapt in the air and sailed through like an arrow. In a swoop, he snatched the crown from the head of the demon king and threw it down.

Then, Sugreeva flew back feeling a great relief.

Ravana stood stunned by the sudden and unexpected swoop of Sugreeva. It just happened in a flash.

Back at his post, Sugreeva divided his army in four sections and despatched them in four directions to close in on Lanka. The orders were to attack at the signal from Lord Rama.

Rama, after a short while, gave his nod and at once, a clarion sounded and the drums boomed.

With that, the monkeys launched attack on Lanka.

From all the four directions, streams of monkeys raced towards the Lanka fort. The air reverberated with war cries.

And hell of the war broke loose.

Meanwhile, Ravana said to his soldiers, "God has sent food for you. Go, and devour those tasty monkeys like nuts."

Horror striking demons flooded out of the fort gates.

Rama and Laxmana started raining their deadly arrows on the demons to deal out death.

Megnad in the Battle Field

The war was raging all over. The demons were initially raring but they soon realised that Rama's monkeys were no easy nuts to crack. Infact, the monkey soldiers had gained the upper hand and the demons were falling back suffering heavy casualties. Inside Lanka city, the panic had spread among the old, females and the young ones. They had started cursing their king for inviting the deadly trouble. This

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information made Ravana send his Indra-victor son Megnad to the battlefield to enthuse the demons.

The demon army came back into action led by mightly Megnad. The demons pounced on monkeys. Rama and Laxmana shot a barrage of powerful arrows and successfully defended monkey soldiers. Megnad resorted to hypnotic illusion tricks. He made himself invisible and rained arrows on Rama and Laxmana. They both fell down wounded and passed out.

Megnad retreated claiming victory.

The monkey soldiers were shocked and stunned. Lord Rama and Laxmana lay unconscious. Arrow shaped snakes were sticking to their bodies. The brothers were squirming in pain. A gloom descended on the monkey soldiers. They stood around surrounding Rama and Laxmana. Many of them were crying. Out of blue, carrier of Lord Vishnu, Garuda landed there. The sight of vulture Garuda made snakes disappear.

Lord Rama got his concious back. He saw his brother lying beside him which greatly worried him. He, at once sat up and placed Laxmana's head in his lap. Garuda began caressing Laxmana's wounds with his wings. The wounds healed instantly and Laxmana rose up.

Garuda revealed to Rama, "The Indra-victor, Megnad had shot the poisonous snakes as arrows with the help of his hypno-illusion power. Their venom made you inconscious. Beware of him. He is a tricky illusionist."

And Garuda flew away majestically.

The recovery of Rama and Laxmana acted as a tonic for the monkeys. They were again raring for battle. Rama and Laxmana also restarted their job of slaying demons. The

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demons again wilted under pressure. Ravana sent two of his famed commanders, Dhumraksha and Prahasta to battle.

The armies hailed their respected Lords with victory slogans and clashed. The newly introduced demon commanders were battle veterans and experts, but their valour was no match for the archery skills of Rama and Laxmana.

Meanwhile, the monkeys attacked the demons by throwing uprooted trees at them. The defeated Dhumraksha and Prahasta ran back to Ravana terrified and reported to him the power of Rama and Laxmana.

Then, irritated Ravana came to battle himself. He challenged Lord Rama for a fight overconfidently.

Rama turned his attention to Ravana.

He welcomed the demon king by smashing down his royal chariot with powerful arrows. The driver and horses got killed. Rama even knocked to pieces the bow of Ravana and shot away his royal crown which fell down to break.

The havoc wreaked by Rama's arrows stunned Ravana and gave him lot of reasons to worry about fearfully.

Lord Rama addressed to the unarmed Ravana, "O Ravana! We warriors of the mainland do not attack an unarmed person. You can safely run away for your life."

The stalwarts who had come with Ravana had been destroyed by the maces of Hanumana and Angada.

On his return, Ravana called an emergency meeting of his ministers and spoke, "All the penances I had done were destroyed today. Because Ravana has been defeated by an ordinary man. My hope now pins on brother Kumbhakarana. It was my mistake to go to the battle field in a rush of blood without any proper preparation. Well....wake up

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Kumbhakarna."

The servants of the palace rushed towards the chamber in which Kumbhakarna was sleeping. Waking him up was no easy task. He was a demon of mountainous proportions. It took a long time of beating of war drums, blowing conchshells and trumpet calls of elephants into his ears.

He always woke up hungry. So, he was fed several roasted deer, pigs and pitcherfuls of wine which he consumed in no time, making horrible chomping and munching sounds. Then he let out a mightly burp which made the walls of the palace shake.

The burp was like an explosion and a signal to Ravana that his brother had come out of his sleep. He came running and told Kumbhakarna about all that had happened. Ravana urged him to go to war at once. Kumbhakarna didn't like the abduction of Sita. He rebuked Ravana for his sinful act, and then he departed to join the battle.

The army of monkeys saw a mountain moving towards them menacingly. It was the demon Kumbhakarna. Scores of monkeys got trampled upon by the demon. Dozens were eaten up by him. Many got blown away. It was a massacre of monkeys.

The frightened monkeys rushed to Lord Rama to inform him of the new problem named Kumbhakarna. Rama and Laxmana at once joined the battle to deal with Kumbhakarna who was rampaging. The brothers shot cluster after cluster of arrows at the demon.

The arrows went into the body of Kumbhakarna like pins go into the pin cushion. Two powerful arrows chopped off the arms of the demon. And one mighty arrow took away the demons head. The body of Kumbhakarna fell down like

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a tall building comes down.

The arrow sailed on with the demon's head and fell into the court of Ravana. It was a greatest shock of life for the demon king.

Meanwhile, the fall of the mighty demon boosted the morale of the monkeys and they regrouped to hit back at the demons with greater ferocity.

Then, Megnad arrived there is his chariot with his soldiers.

The monkeys were planning to attack the group when someone yelled. "O Brothers! Look, Look! It's Mother Sita in the Chariot with Megnad. Perhaps they want to hand her over to us."

But Megnad warned, "Beware! If any one moves towards us I will kill her, the root cause of all the troubles."

It shocked the monkeys. Some of them ran towards Rama and Laxmana to tell them about the new development. Megnad laughed loudly and announced, "Before the monkeys return I will perform Invincibility Yajna."

The monkeys relayed the news to Rama. It shocked him out of senses. Vibhishana managed to revive him and he revealed, "O Lord! You are not aware of the tricks of Megnad. Sita whom the monkeys saw was another illusion, not real. I guess he is planning to perform the Yajna which can make him invincible. He used the illusion to keep you away from the Yajna for its interruption free completion. His Yajna must be spoiled otherwise we won't be able to defeat him."

"Laxmana, spoil his Yajna," Rama instructed Laxmana.

Laxmana at once came to the spot where Megnad was preparing for Yajna. He defiled and destroyed the spot. Madly angered Megnad launched severe attacks on Laxmana.

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Laxmana faced his anger bravely. Megnad used all kinds of powerful arrows and weapons against his opponent. Laxmana stood his ground and foiled all the attempts. In sheer desperation, Megnad turned his ire on monkey soldiers by targetting them with his many fangled arrows. Every arrow multiplied into thousand arrows and hit the monkeys. It became a funeral of the monkey army. The ground was getting piled up with dead monkeys. This scene alarmed Hanumana. He jumped into the fray with his mighty mace. Hanumana expanded himself to tower over the demons and began raining down mace blows on the demons. Now it was the demon side which was getting crushed.

Then, Megnad turned his attention to Hanumana and gave him the taste of his deadly arrows. But Hanumana defended himself successfully.

Now, Megnad changed his tactics. His failure against Laxmana and Hanumana was adding fuel to the fire of his anger. He resorted to using terrifying demonic weapons and his favourite illusion tricks.The monkeys were getting confused and falling down because they had never faced such puzzles. The demon warriors also attacked more fiercely.

The battle was becoming fiercer and fiercer. To neutralise the power of Megnad, Laxmana was fighting with all his might and skill. It was a do or die battle for both the sides.

Laxmana on one side, and Megnad on the other.

There were attacks and counter attacks. The battle cries were being countered by rival battle cries. A warrior went down groaning to death, his victor rose up in air with cry of victory.

Laxmana tore away the chariot flag of Megnad and killed his driver. Vibhishana lent a helping hand by destroying

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the wheels of the chariot of Megnad.

A red faced Megnad shouted, "O power mad Laxmana take this!" He shot a demonic arrow of destruction force at Laxmana which hit him in the chest.

Laxmana came down with a painful scream.

Rama saw his brother falling and came running to the spot.

The arrow of destruction force had gone deep into Laxmana. Rama pulled out the arrow. Then, he said to his warriors, "Dear warriors! Please shield my brother by standing around him. I will deal with that deceitful Megnad."

Rama turned back to challenge Megnad who was celebrating his success with a great laugh.

Rama's arrow pierced the shoulder of the enemy. He followed it up with showers of arrows which made Megnad look like a porcupine. But he was fighting on regardless of the injuries to him. His success against Laxmana was making him intoxicated. Rama treated him to more arrows.

Due to the bleeding Megnad was losing energy fast. He could not stay in the battle for long.

At last, he retired, and with him the demon army also fled.

Then, Rama tossed his bow and quilt to one side and sat down to hold Laxmana's head in his lap. He began sobbing.

Laxmana was unconscious.

At Vibhishana's suggestion, Hanumana flew to Lanka and brought a famed physician named Sushen airlifting his entire house. After examining Laxmana, Sushen said, "Lord Rama! Do not worry. Laxmana has just fainted. The force that has hit him is destructive. Sanjeevani herbal plant is the antidote.

It grows on a hill in the Himalayas. The plant must be

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applied before day break. Otherwise...."

Lord Rama moaned, "O God! Dear Sushen, how is it possible to bring that from Himalayas in such a short time? O Agony! With what face shall I be able to return home without the dearest Laxmana!"

Hanumana spoke, "Lord! Don't dispair. I shall bring that plant in time."

Rama looked at Hanumana hopefully and tearfully.

"Bless me, Lord."

Lord Rama blessed him. Then, Hanumana asked about the hill and the identification clues to that plant from Sushen.

And he took off and was soon streaking through the sky.

Meanwhile, Ravana had come to know about this. So, he had appointed a demon, named Kalnemi, to create hurdles in the route of Hanumana to prevent him from returning before the day break.

The demon transformed himself into a *sadhu* and sat chanting Rama's name under a hastily constructed shed.

A low flying Hanumana heard the chant and he landed down to ask for some water to quench his thirst.

He bowed before Kalnemi and asked for the water. Kalnemi informed Hanumana that the water could be had at the nearby pond.

It was a trick of the demon.

As soon as Hanumana reached the bank of the pond, a giant spider dragged him into the water. He gave it a hard knock with his fist and killed it. Hanumana's act lifted the curse on that spider.

It gratefully revealed, "O Son of Wind! You are being tricked. That *sadhu* you just met, is infact a demon named Kalnemi who is there to stop your progress in your mission."

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Hanumana fastened the demon with his tail and smashed it down to death.

In Himalayas, failing to identify the plant, he lifted the entire hill off its base and flew back carrying it in his enlarged form.

On his way, he overflew Ayodhya. Down below, Bharata was on guard. He mistook Hanumana for a demon and shot his arrow.

The arrow brought down Hanumana. He fell chanting the name of Lord Rama. The chant brought Bharata to him, on the run. He asked, "O Great Monkey! Who are you, sir?"

"I am Rama's servant Hanumana, Brother. I was taking a life saving plant for Laxmana," saying so, he narrated the entire story to Bharata.

Bharata embraced Hanumana and gave his own introduction. Then, he said, "O Sir! The time is running out. You can reach there in time only by riding my lightening fast arrow."

The Bharata shot arrow carried Hanumana to Rama is a flash.

The arrival of Hanumana sent waves of joy through the monkey army and Lord Rama. Hanumana put the hill down and said to Sushen, "Sir, I could not identify the Sanjeevani plant. So, I brought the hill it grows on."

The physician, Sushen picked out the plant and turned it into medicine form. The application of the medicine worked like magic.

In a short time, Laxmana was on his feet again.

An overjoyed Rama embraced his brother and the monkey soldiers danced around in elation.

Then Lord Rama sought Hanumana and gratefully

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hugged him to say, "O Hanumana! You have made it a habit to make me more and more indebted to you. Brother Laxmana! It is the dare devilry of our dear Hanumana which saved you from certain death."

Laxmana moved forward and thankfully embraced Hanumana.

The news of Laxmana's recovery upset Megnad but he didn't show it to his warriors. He put on a brave face and declared, "Now 1 will wreak complete destruction on the enemy. Get my magic chariot ready."

In the magic chariot, he drove into the sky and let out a thunderous laughter. It scared the monkey army. Strange kind of demonic weapons started raining down from the sky. Megnad and the chariot had become invisible. Intermitantly the rain of arrows also came down. It was all the show of the demon princes's hypno-illusion powers. He even created strange sounds of "Kill-Kill" and "Get him-Get him" to echo through the air. It created confusion and panic among monkeys. All efforts to locate him in the sky were failing.

Megnad remained invisible.

At last, Laxmana gave up scanning the sky. He closed his eyes and concentrated to telepathically locate the point which created evil waves. Laxmana shot his most powerful arrow aimed at that point. It hit Megnad in chest and he fell dead. His evil chariot came tumbling down from the sky.

That was the end of the mighty Indira-victor, Megnad.

End of Ravana

Now, Ravana had to take charge of the battle. He was frustrated because of the death of his brother, son and other

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prominent warriors. He came out riding a fast chariot.

All the remaining warriors accompained him. They were also in their chariots. So many moving chariots created a rumbling sound. The earth quaked. The air trembled. The rising dust blocked the sunrays.

Rama alerted his army and the commanders.

Both the armies came face to face and then, pounced on each other in do-or-die struggle. The war reached at full cry in no time. The arrows rained. When Vibhishana saw Ravana perched high on his massive chariot, fear struck him. He spoke to Rama in concerned voice, "O Lord! You have no chariot and no armour. How would you face that mighty demon king who sits fortified high up in his chariot?"

Lord Rama smiled, "Vibhishana! Don't worry. Self confidence is my chariot. Valour and forbearance are wheels of that chariot. And righteousness is the flag on it. Power, wisdom, endurance and charity are the horses that pull it. Forgiveness, kindness and Justice are the reigns. Devotion is the driver of my chariot. The spirit of sacrifice is my shield. Character and moral principles are my armour. Dear Vibhishana, I am well supported to ensure the victory."

Ravana and his demon army attacked the monkey soldiers with great ferocity and ire. The demon king was using all his twenty hands to rain arrows and to use otiier weapons looking like a one man army.

Rama and Laxmana turned to face Ravana. It was the moment of truth. Both the brothers greeted their enemy with showers of arrows. Rama's arrows sliced off many of the heads of Ravana several times. But to their shock Rama and Laxmana saw that new heads grew in place of the severed heads. And the new heads would laugh mockingly at them.

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Vibhishana said to the puzzled Rama, "O Lord! He won't die in this way. He has divine nectar pouch inside his navel which gives him regeneration power."

Lord Rama selected a special arrow and invoked the name of his Guru before shooting it. The arrow went into the navel of the demon king Ravana. And with that, Ravana fell off his chariot and collapsed on the ground with a horrible cry.

After shaking with agony for some time, the great bulk of Ravana became still, finally dead.

Crowning of Vibhishana

After Ravana's death, Vibhishana forgot all the bitterness and the injustices done to him by his brother. All the childhood memories came back to him which gave him more grief. The news of the death of Ravana sent shock waves into Lanka and the palaces.

There was gloom all around. Mandodari and other female members of the royal family rushed to the battle field to mourn the death of the king. In Lanka, the demons feared that Rama would order slaying of all the living demons. They holed up in their homes. But their fears were baseless.

Rama consoled Vibhishana and instructed him to give Ravana's body funeral with all state honours and religious rites. Accordingly, Ravana's last rites were performed by Vibhishana with royal grace. Queen Mandodari and other queens greatly appreciated this noble gesture of Lord Rama.

The next day, Rama summoned Laxmana, Sugreeva, Hanumana, Jamwanta and Angada to say, "You should go to Lanka and perform the crowning of Vibhishana as the new King of Lanka with due ceremony."

Vibhishana requested, "O Lord! You must come to Lanka

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and grace the occasion."

Rama said, "No friend! I shall not enter any city till the completion of my exile period of 14 years."

Then, Laxmana accompanied by others entered Lanka city and performed the crowning of Vibhishana with due pomp and show.

After that Lord Rama ordered Vibhishana, Angada and Hanumana to bring Sita from Lanka with due respect. The entire war was fought for that very purpose. So, others were just waiting for that command.

They all went to Ashoka garden in a procession. Sita was brought in a royal palanquin. After putting down the palanquin, Hanumana prayed to Lord Rama, "O Lord! Mother Sita, for whom you waged the great battle, who had been pining for you for so long, who has endured the injustices of demons, she is very pleased at your historic victory. Kindly come to receive her, Lord."

Hanumana's talk brought tears to Rama's eyes. He, at once walked to the palanquin and lifted the curtain to reaveal Sita. Then, he gave her a hand to help her step out. Sita was quite and composed. But her eyes betrayed with the tears of immense joy and relief. All the persons present could not held sobbing and smiling through tears.

Fire Test of Sita

Suddenly, Rama's face became serious and he addressed to Sita, "O Daughter of Janaka! I fulfilled my part of the duty by bringing you the liberation. O My Life! I know you are blameless and pious, yet for the sake of the public vindication, you must go through the fire test."

Sita was stunned to hear this. Every one present there

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froze. There was such shocked silence that the words of Rama echoed soundlessly.

Laxmana did not like his brother's stand at all, which showed on his face. He looked sharply at Rama.

A pyre was prepared with the permission of Lord Rama.

Sita sat on the pyre amid flames invoking silently Lord God with the words to the fire, "If by thought, deed and words, I never dreamed of any other man than my Rama, then, O God of Fire, understand the state of my mind and the situation here I face, cool down your flames to feel like soft feathers to caress me through this test."

The leaping flames burnt down all the reasons which could raise doubts about Sita's piety. For Sita herself the flames were no different than wafts of cool breeze in the red colour.

The god of Fire appeared and testified, "O Lord! Sita is as pure as the waters of holy Ganga. And she is as true as the truth itself."

Lord Rama consoled Sita by publicly embracing her in acceptance.

Vibhishana requested Lord Rama to stay for some time in Lanka as his guest. But Rama politely declined the offer as he could not think of letting his brother, Bharata suffer his wait. For the past fourteen years, Bharata has been praying for his return.

Lord Rama thanked the soldiers of the armies of the monkeys and the bears for fighting his war.

On the insistence of Vibhishana, Rama agreed to use Lanka's flying chariot, Pushpaka. Rama, Sita, Laxmana, Sugreeva, Vibhishana and Hanumana boarded the chariot and it majestically rose in the air to head towards Ayodhya.

The exile of Rama had come to an end.

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Seventh Chapter

UTTARAKANDA

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Hanumana met Bharata in the guise of a Brahmin. Rama's arrival in Ayodhya delighted Bharata and overwhelmed him. Rama greeted Bharata. Fourteen years of trauma was washed away in tears shed by all who witnessed the reunion. Rama was crowned King and his reign began. All were happy and thankful to God. But it did not last very long. One day, a washerman was heard to question the morality of Sita having been accepted back by Rama after she had spent some time with Ravana though as prisoner and the first test not withstanding. Rama decided to abandon Sita. Laxmana left the pregnant Sita in a forest near sage Valmikis ashram. Sage gave Sita a shelter. She bore two sons—Lava and Kusha. They grew up as the boys of exceptional qualities.

The kingdom of Ayodhya organised Ashwamedha Yajna where a Sita's replica of gold was used. Ashwamedha Horse was followed by Shatrughana and his army.

It was the start of the world conquest expedition.

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Return of Rama

Only a day was left for the scheduled return of Lord Rama to Ayodhya, But no news about his whereabouts had reached the city. Bharata, who lived outside the city gate, in a hut, sat wondering about it. Then, a *Brahmin* gave him a call from outside. Bharata came out to see the caller. The *Brahmin* greeted him with folded hands, "Lord Rama is about to descend on Ayodhya."

The news delighted Bharata. He relayed the good news to Ayodhya. The long awaited message of the arrival of Lord Rama spread through the city like a wild fire. The public servents and common folk began decorating the city to give a rousing welcome to the King of their hearts, Lord Rama. The day, people had been eagerly waiting for the last fourteen years had finally arrived. After giving Bharata the good news, the Brahmin vanished in thin air. It was none other than Rama's dear soldier, Hanumana.

Union With Bharata

The flying chariot 'Pushpaka' landed outside Ayodhya. All the passengers alighted and walked to the outskirts of the city with their hearts beating fast.

Then, Lord Rama and his party saw Bharata rushing towards them. He was in tribal briefs and bare foot. Following him were the ministers, chieftans, courtiers, soldiers and a crowd of citizens. Shatrughana was protecting

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Bharata like a zealous body guard.

The sight of approaching Bharata brought tears to the eyes of Lord Rama. Bharata lunged forward and lay prosterate before Rama. Rama picked him up and hugged him. Their voice were too choked to be able to say any words. The brothers held each other tight and let tears drench them. This union made every pair of eyes watching it fill up with tears. Vibhishana, Sugreeva, Angada, Hanumana and Sita, too sobbed with happiness.

It was the sight for the gods to see.

Coronation of Rama

A message brought guru Vashishta to Ayodhya. With his permission Rama opened loose his bun of ascetic's hair. Then, he took bath and donned royal dress. Sita was also washed and bathed by the women folk of the palace. Proper make up and decoration changed her into a royal lady. With permission of Rama, Guru and brother Bharata, Laxmana also became a royal person again. So did Bharata. Guru Vashishta applied coronation *tilak* on Rama's forehead and put crown on his head. Thus, Rama became King Rama of Ayodhya.

The three mother queens performed the traditional *pooja* of the new King to the thunderous hailing by the citizens and courtiers with the slogans of Victory to "Raja Rama," and "long live Sita-Rama." A few days after the coronation, the royal court held a session in which the guests were also present. The guests included Vibhishana, Sugreeva, Crown Prince Angada and Hanumana etc.

King Rama addressed to them, "Honourable king Vibhishana and king Sugreeva and other friend guests.

My victory in war against the evil Ravana was made

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possible only by your all out support to me. It is a great good fortune to have friends like you. And your love for me keeps you here tied to me. Due to this I am feeling guilty. My bondage is denying your love to your homes and families. And your kingdoms and subjects are suffering for your absence. Friends, please go to attend to your duties instead of devoting yourselves to me only. Physical separation is unimportant as long as we live in one another's heart. I shall always remain grateful to you."

"O Lord! We wish to stay in your service but we can't disobey your command too, So, we shall do as you have advised," Vibhishana bowed his head.

Sugreeva expressed similar sentiments. But Hanumana appeared unwilling to him. So, he asked, "O Son of Wind! Don't you want to go back with me?"

"That is true, O My King. I have lost all interests in everything except serving Lord Rama," Hanumana replied to his king with folded hands.

"Dear Hanumana! Give me some proof the love you claim to have for Lord Rama." Sugreeva demanded.

At this, Hanumana tore open his chest and all of them saw his heart reflecting the images of Lord Rama and Mother Sita.

The people present there bowed their heads in respect to Hanumana's devotion. Sugreeva said, "O Son of Wind! Your devotion to Rama is immeasurable. It is incredible. I, the king of monkeys, Sugreeva, free you of all obligations and responsiblities to me."

Rama's Rajya

Rama's reign began and with that, peace descended on the kingdom of Kaushal which soon became an ideal state.

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Everyone was reasonably prosperous. The rains came regularly on time and in good measure to keep off famines. The people became religious. Everyone was blessed with good health and desease free life of a long span. The harvests were extremely good. The violence had become thing of the past. The spirit of brotherhood transcended to animals even. It is said that during Rama's reign lions and goats drank water at the same bank. The crime was almost non existent. The overzealous spirit of religion prevailing all around made sure that sins were very rarely committed. King Rama himself led a very pious life which reflected in his subjects.

Rama, every morning, went to the Saryu river to take morning bath and to perform sun worship. The people watched him go to the river standing on their door steps or balconies. For them it was prayer to God. Guru Vashishta always gave regular sermons to him.

The three brothers were close associates of King Rama in running the state. Rama delegated most of the administrative duties to his brothers without any discriminaion. He often went to tour his kingdom and talked with subjects.

King Rama's spies lived amongst the people and reported to him about the condition of the people and their views and thoughts about the rulers. One day, one such spy came to him and stood aside silent after paying obeisance to him. Doubts arose in Rama's mind and he said to the spy, "Some bad news? Speak fearlessly whatever it is."

"Lord! I seek your forgiveness....but....," he stammered.

"Say what you have to report," Rama said sternly and remarked, "I guess it is something very unpleasant. But you should not keep it locked inside you. Come, speak out."

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"O Lord!" The spy closed his eyes and revealed in a very pained voice, "It is something that a washerman said. His wife had stayed at some other man's house for a night. So, he wanted to reject her. Before a gathering he declared that he was not Rama who accepted back Sita even after she lived at Ravana's for so long a time. He expelled his wife and no one objected to it."

The spy opened his eyes and saw King Rama's face darkening.

Sita Disowned

King Rama, his face darkened, stared into empty space. The court sat in shocked silence.

Then, Rama allowed the spy to go and dismissed the court.

He retired to his palace and gave the mattter a serious thought. He debated within himself. At last, he reached to a decision, to save the grace and credibility of the throne and to safeguard the people's faith in the religion and social values, he must disown Sita and banish her. That is, if the report of the spy is confirmed to be true.

The report was true.

The next day, as usual, the younger brothers, Laxamana, Bharata arid Shatrughana went to pay respects to King Rama. Rama did not speak. He just raised his hands to acknowledge their greetings and respects. The brothers were puzzled to find the king brother unusually cold and in grim mood. The brothers looked at one another in surprise. No one knew the reason. The brothers were not present when the spy had reported about the washerman's talk, the previous day in the court. The ministers had not reported it

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because all of them had dismissed it as an idle talk of a drunkard washerman, not worth taking seriously.

At last, Laxmana asked, "What's the matter, Brother? Has any one of us done something wrong inadvertently?"

"No Laxmana! For the grace of the crown we are required to make a sacrifice."

"Sacrifice? Whose and what, O Lord?" Laxmana wanted to know. He felt uneasy. There was something sinister in the air.

Rama announced, "You must take Sita to the forests and leave her there to her own fate."

"What, O Lord?" all the brothers asked in one shocked voice.

Rama said, "I think that is the will of the God. We must uphold the people's trust. Do what I say."

"There has got to be a reason to meet out such cruel treatement to Mother Sita, What wrong had she done, O Lord?" Laxmana could not held asking.

"My orders should be obeyed, Laxmana. If the order is not carried out I will take my life."

This threat alarmed the three brothers.

Bharata also insisted to know the reason for such a harsh punishment to Sita. King Rama had to reveal the reason and said, "We have to respect the people's opinion and not lose their respect."

Laxmana said in anger, "O Lord! I shall cut off the tongue of that wretch who has cast aspersions on my pious Mother Sita! Why should we give any importance to the abusive talk of a drunken lout of low birth, O Lord Rama?"

Rama argued, "Credibility of throne and the grace of social values depend on the public opinion, brother. It is

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not the question of who is technically right or wrong. Social values must be respected by the royalty. Laxmana, You must do...."

"O Brother! How can I....?"

"Laxmana! It is not the brother you are talking to. What you have been asked to do is the order of your King. Obey it?"

King Rama's voice was irritated and his face had become harsh.

Bharata and Shatrughana stood frozen.

Laxmana bowed to King Rama with pain on his face and withdrew.

Sita Abandoned

Laxmana took Sita to the forest on the pretext of showing her hutments of penance doing sages. At a lonely spot, he made her alight apparently for a breather. All through the journey Laxmana had kept quiet and did not answer the Sita's queries.

Sita asked, "Brother Laxmana! You look upset today and behave in a strange manner like never before. What is the matter?"

Laxmana stood before her with folded hands, staring at the ground, "Mother Sita! Forgive your Laxmana for he is going to say something so terrible that his tongue feels sick. King Rama has disowned you. I have been ordered to abandon you in this forest. Oh God! Help me. Help Mother Sita!"

"No....! Why....Why??" Sita fell down like struck by lightning and fainted.

Laxmana wanted to rush to help her but he remembered

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the King's command to leave Sita at her fate. Laxmana, the King's servant, obediently drove the chariot back.

When Sita regained her consciousness, she found the chariot and Laxmana gone. She was all alone in that frightening jungle and Sita even did not know the reason for her abandonment by Rama. In sheer desparation, she looked up at the skies and wailed, "O God! Did you have to allot only pains and tragedies to my lot? Why is my Rama so cruel and heartless to me? I failed even after passing the fire test! Why, O Why?"

Just then, sage Valmiki came that way and was very surprised to find a woman wailing alone in the harshness of the jungle. He approached the unfortunate woman and enquired, "Daughter! Who are you and why do you weep sitting alone in this dangerous forest?"

Sita said, "O Sage! I am Sita, the daughter of King Janaka and the wife of the King of Ayodhya, Lord Rama Chandra. Rama has abandoned me for some reason I know not." Then, Sita narrated her tale to the sage.

Sita in Valmiki *Ashram* : Lave & Kusha Born

"Daughter Sita! It is unbelievable that a principled King like Lord Rama disowned you without telling you any reason. Perhaps it is the fate that is making all this happen."

"But O Sage! How shall I survive in this forest?"

"You need not worry about it. Your father, King Janaka is my disciple. Hence, I undertake the responsibility of taking care of you as my duty. You shall live at my *ashram* which is nearby."

Thus, Sage Valmiki took Sita to his *ashram*.

She started living in the ashram with other pupil of the

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sage. The religious atmosphere and the holy discourses provided great consolation to her. She was pregnant when Laxmana abondened her in the forest. The pregnancy also proved as great strength to her. The motherhood is such a power of woman that it enables her to face any hardship the world can create. Even a bed of thorns becomes a bed of roses for a woman in the family way.

In due course, Sita gave birth to twins, both male, cute little ones. Sage Valmiki named them Lava and Kusha. Their arrival changed the world of Sita. Mothering them made her forget all her pains and the tragedies. She was now in a dreamworld of the mother of two bright hopes.

Lava and Kusha grew up in the loving care of their mother and the benevolent presence of the sage. The children called their mother "Goddess of Forests." The sage taught them letters and the other subjects of education.

Sage Valmiki wrote a poem on the tragedy of their mother and made the children sing it in the form of a song. Lava and Kusha evolved a very beautiful tune for the song and sang it as their prayer.

The sage didn't reveal on then that King Rama was their father.

When they grew up a little more, sage Valmiki began teaching and training them into archery. They learnt the arrow shooting very quickly as it was in their blood. Lava and Kusha were very fearless and daredevil. It pleased Valmiki very much. Hence, he gave them advanced training in archery and imparted to them some very secret martial knowledges.

Sita would watch her sons shoot arrows in great delight. They looked like little Ramas. She felt a pain in her heart

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sometimes and memories of Rama and Laxmana made her nostalgic.

Ashwamedha Yaggy

Meanwhile, one day, King Rama went to the *ashram* of guru Vashishta along with his brothers and ministers.

He spoke to the guru, "O Guru! With your blessing I have performed several Yaggys. But now the subjects of my kingdom are urging me to perform Ashwamedha Yaggy'."

"Do it, King Rama! It is a privilege of every powerful king. The subjects get great pleasure in believing that their King is unvincible. It gives them confidence and pride. But...."

"But what, O Guru?" Rama asked.

"Son, the Yaggy requires the presence of the doer's wife. All the Yaggys you performed happened to be when Sita was here."

"Oh! So, won't I be able to fulfil this wish, O Sage? Is there no alternative to Sita's presence?"

"There is one. We can use Queen Sita's life size gold model."

"I will take that option, O Guru," said Rama and instructed Bharata, "Brother Bharata, You will make the arrangements for the Yaggy."

"As you wish, Brother," Bharata obediently bowed.

When the arrangements for the Ashwamedha Yaggy were completed, the message was relayed to King Rama and Guru Vashishta. They came to the Yaggy venue and were very impressed and praised Bharata profusely.

Guru Vashishta made astrological calculations and announced the date of the commencement of Yaggy. Formal

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invitation letters to subordinate or guest kings, warriors and sages were sent through messengers.

Sugreeva, Vibhishana, Jamwanta, Angada, Nal and Neel were special invitees.

Sage Vishwamitra also arrived. So did thousands of other sages.

The king Janaka was also invited. With great pleasure he came with his family guru, ministers and his army to help King Rama if required. The fate of Sita was not a matter of discord because Janaka did not blame Rama as he was firm believer in *Karma*. King Janaka was warmly greeted and Bharata took special care to extend greatest hospitality to him.

Entire city of Ayodhaya was agog with pride.

The Yaggy commenced at the appointed auspicious hour. On stage, a life size golden model of Queen Sita was installed by the side of King Rama.

The model was so beautiful and graceful that it became the main attraction of the Yaggy.

For Yaggy, a majestic white horse was selected after a careful examination of thousands of horses. It was the symbol of theYaggy. On that day the Ashwamedha Horse was bedecked in precious jewellery.

King Rama took part along with his brothers and other clan members. They gave their offerings to holy Yaggy fire. The Yaggy climaxed when the Horse was worshipped amidst the chorus chanting of mantras. The Horse was crowned with a declaration on its forehead.

The declaration read,

"The Ashwamedha Horse represents the almighty King of Ayodhya, Shri Ramachandra. Any one who dares to

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challenge the supremacy of King Ramachandra may tether this horse and fight the army of King Rama. Or accept his domination and rule untroubled."

King Rama appointed Shatrughana as the commander of the army that would follow the Ashwamedha Horse to defend its honours.

Then, King Rama set the horse free to chart its own course.

King Rama gave his order to Shatrughana, "Go Brother. Defend the honour of our Ashwamedha Horse."

"As you order, O King," said Shatrughana and marched after the horse with his army transported by 4000 horses. 2000 chariots, 100 elephants and supplies carriers. This army was followed by groups of mobile traders and entertainment groups or troups.

Shatrughana was careful not to trouble or unconvenience common folk or let them suffer any damage.

The first one to block the progress of the horse was a demon king Lavanasura. He was very powerful and cruel. He had defeated several kings, gods and snake powers.

When Shatrughana received the news of the hold up of Ashwamedha Horse, he prepared for war. Lavanasura's capital city was laid to seize. The demon king came out to wage a battle.

Lavanasura was no easy customer. He was using all the tricks and demonic sorcery. His army too was very strong and tricky. Many of the soldiers of Shatrughana got killed due to the tricks of demons. His soldiers appeared to be wilting under the pressure of the demons. Shatrughana didn't want to take any more chances. He drew out a special arrow given to him by King Rama and shot it at the demon king

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Lavanasura.

The arrow brought down the demon who died after flip-flopping on the ground in agony for some time.

The death of the king demoralised the demon army and it surrendered to Shatrughana.

The demons accepted the domination of Ayodhya Kingdom and Shatrughana formally pardoned them.

He appointed a ruler to that state before proceeding further.

The perishment of the mighty Lavanasura frightened the other kings who were entertaining the idea of challenging the Ashwamedha army. Most of them presented themselves to Shatrughana and turned their kingdoms as subject states of Ayodhya Empire. The kings who did not willingly bend were straightened out by the valour of Shatrughana and the power of his sword.

The victorious Shatrughana marched on conquering and subjugating kingdoms and lands.

The Ayodhya Empire was expanding fast.

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Eighth Chapter

LAVA-KUSHA KANDA

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Lava and Kusha captured Ashwamedha Horse. The pair of the little warriors defeated the army of Ayodhya and sent Shatrughana into unconscious state. Then, Laxmana, Hanumana and Bharata too bit the dust. King Rama had to join the battle. The archery of the twins surprised Rama. When Lava and Kusha gave their introduction and read out their biography, Rama was stunned, Rama blocked the arrows shot by the twins at him but hesitated to hit back. The army was puzzled at this. When Hanumana tried to intervene, the twins took him prisoner. When Sita found Hanumana imprisoned she realised who her son were battling with. The seriousness of the situation brought Valmiki in the battle field. The truth was revealed. The war ended. King Rama embraced his sons and wished to take them along to Ayodhya. But he kept silent about Sita. Sita felt humiliated and she prayed Mother Earth to take her in. The earth split and Sita let herself to be swallowed in. After some time King Rama turned over the kingdom to his sons and entered into the waters of the Saryu river with his brothers to embrace death.

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Lava-Kusha Battle Shatrughana

Ashwamedha journey of the Horse and the army continued. Vanquishing several capitals and lands, then, Horse took the mountain route. And it reached the same forest where lay the *ashram* of sage Valmiki. Lava and Kusha were practising on their arrows and bows when they sighted a decked up majestic white horse go trotting by. Lava exclamed, "Brother! Look! What a lovely horse! Lets's catch it. Appears a ran-away horse."

Kusha seconded, "Yes, Lava! We can ride it. We should know how to shoot arrows from horse back."

"Yes! Lets catch it. Let's catch it!" They both ran towards the horse and one of them grabbed the reign. The horse bucked up but the boys held it down. And then, they tied it to a tree and out of curiousity read the declaration. Lava and Kusha looked at each other and smiled mysteriously.

Meanwhile, the advance unit of army following the horse reached there. The tied Ashwameda Horse angered them. They looked around and found two boys looking like a pair of small sages, standing near the tree. The unit leader sent a soldier to untie the horse and announced that the Prince Shatrughana might like to camp there or take a rest. The soldier went to the twins and said, "Sons! You have done a wrong thing in tying this Horse. It is no ordinary horse, boys. Ashwamedha Horse, it is. Let us set it free and you go home to your mothers."

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"Soldier! Do not take us for tribal boys. We know what it means to tie this horse to the tree. We have read the declaration," the twins defiantly said and stood to guard.

The soldier laughed, "Brave boys indeed! And clever. Blessed by your parents. Now, the play is over. Give me the Horse or I will forcibly take it." The soldier made a treatening gesture.

Kusha challenged, "We shall like to see you using force. Don't waste time in using your stupid tongue. Fight like a soldier of Rama, whoever he is."

The arguments had brought other soldiers also there. The twins were now confronted by a unit of soldiers. The captain of the soldiers remarked, "Some stupid tribal kids! Free the Horse. If these make trouble thrash the two," he ordered harshly.

In reply Lava and Kusha shot arrows and before long, the soldiers were on the ground, feeling their wounds. They were shocked.

The ferocity and swiftness of the attack of twins had frightened the soldiers.

When the twins menancingly strummed their bow strings, the soldiers got up and ran for their lives.

Shatrughana saw his soldiers of the advance unit come running badly wounded. He was in angry mood as continuous victories had made him fierce and imperious. He thundered, "Where is Ashwamedha Horse? And who harmed you?"

, The soldiers gave incredible information, "The horse has been taken by two sage boys. They don't release the horse. When we tried they shot arrows to reduce us to this state."

Shatrughana laughed sarcastically, "Two boys! And you

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could not deal with them? I think you are getting too tired to stay on your legs, Show me the boys."

The soldiers led him to the spot where Lava and Kusha still stood guarding the horse. Shatrughana was very amused. He wanted to hug them. He said to them, "Sons! I will give your another horse, two horses to amuse yourself with. But give us this horse like good boys."

"Who are you, Royal Person? Why do you wander around with an army like a nomad?" Lava asked.

"Sons, I am the brother of King Rama. Name is Shatrughana. This horse is Ashwamedha Horse. It means battle. So, give it to me."

"Why are you begging, Prince? The horse is here. Take it after defeating us in war. That is what your declaration says. Or do you only fight with tongues?"

"Spoiled boys! such foul language! Let me show you what battling is. You need teaching a lesson."

A raging Shatrughana shot an arrow. Lava and Kusha easily cut it away. And they cut off the royal flag of the chariot of Shatrughana.

It sent Shatnighana mad. Not only he himself waged battle but ordered his soldiers also to attack .

A fierce battle raged on. The bravery of the boys amazed the soldiers. Shatrughana was getting angrier and angrier. He was failing to tackle the twins. A sudden shower of arrows caught Shatrughana. He fell down injured. Another shower destroyed his battle chariot and the fallen Shatrughana spilled to the ground and fainted.

This sent panic waves among the soldiers and they fell back. Many of them ran away in confusion. The ones who stood their ground were claimed by the arrows of Lava and

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Kusha. The success was making the twins more and more fierce and aggressive.

The mighty army of Ayodhya was in shambles and the Ashwamedha Horse stood tied to the tree.

Laxmana in Battle

When the messenger gave the news of the incredible bravery of two minor sage boys against his army to King Rama, he was surprised. He summoned Laxmana and told him the situation and ordered, "Laxmana! Go with your army and imprison those boys whoever they are, they are said to be merely kids. Don't kill them."

"As you wish, O king," Laxamana said a little puzzled and added, "There is something mysterious about those boys. Two kids of same age felling a fierce and mighty warrior like Shatrughana makes no sense. The whole affair is suspicious."

"No Brother Laxmana! There is no scope for doubt. They are sons of some sage or some tribal man," the messenger insisted, "And their ferocity in battle is also no fairy tale. I saw it myself. They rain arrows like rainy season clouds release showers. And it is wiping out our armies."

"It looks like some miracle thing. No one could stand ground in face of the warriors of the Sun dynasty. How strange!"

"Don't waste time, Laxmana. Get the boys and let us see what exactly they look like," Rama said and Laxmana set out with his army.

He reached the battle field as early as possible. He found his brother unconcious. The soldiers were lying injured or running around in confusion. Some were hiding in fright.

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His appearance gave soldiers some courage. When Laxmana caste his eyes on the twins, he stood transfixed. They were cuddly cherubic young kids. Laxmana called out, "Dear sage boys! Our soldiers have been kidding because of your tender age. Shatrughana also toyed with you. Free our horse and go home. We Raghuvanshis have always been kind to gods, *brahmins*, devotees and the children. Laxmana blesses you protection."

This made the twins laugh heartily and then Lava taunted, "Laxmana! The same coward who abandoned a helpless woman in a jungle? The woman, whom he used to call mother or sister. We don't feel such gutless person even fit to talk with. This time you can leave your honour behind and rush back to your rat hole Ayodhya."

The words of Lava felt to Laxmana like red hot irons put on his body. He winced with inner agony. He grumbled in a hot voice, "Stupid boys! You have mouths larger than mountain caves. We are not fighting seriously because you are too tender for harsh treatment. But it is clear that your heads are full of nonsense."

"Let me see what you have on your head inside that crown," an arrow from Kusha took away Laxmana's crown.

He saw his crown being flung away on the earth at a distance. It made Laxmana shake with anger. The heat of his anger made the air around spark off. The clouds collided to thunder and flash the lightning. In extreme anger Laxmana shot a barrage of arrows at the twins. The arrows were chopped down by counter arrows, by Lava and Kusha.

In frustration, Laxmana threw down his bow and clenched his fists as if to pummel the boys. Kusha quietly walked up to him and landed a lightning swift punch on Laxmana

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which stunned him.

Laxmana picked up his bow again and put a very special arrow to the string. He invoked Lord Rama and shot it.

The arrow hit the arm of Kusha and hurt him. He swayed for a few moments and then fell down and faint. It worried Lava. He bent down and caressed his brother invoking the name of their mother and sage Valmiki. It worked like magic. Kusha recovered fast and was up on his feet again.

Kusha's miracle recovery alerted Laxmana. He used all those arrows with which he had once tormented warriors like Ravana and Megnad. But they made little impression on the boys.

Now, it amazed and worried Laxmana. It was something which was beyond his understanding. How such powerful weapons were cut down by two boys? Laxmana remorsefully recalled mother Sita. Did his participation in the terrible injustic done to her made his weapons powerless as a curse?

Meanwhile, Lava had made up his mind to settle score with Laxmana for hurting his brother. He shot a very secret arrow blessed to him by sage Valmiki. It sailed with a terrifying roar and caught Laxmana unaware. The arrow hit him in the chest and brought him down with a thud.

His fall shocked the soldiers of Rama's army. They fell back.

The war for the day was called off. The casualties were removed from the battle field.

A messenger raced toAyodhya to relay the sad news of the latest development and the fall of Laxmana.

The news worried King Rama. Now he was realising that it was no kid game. The situation had become serious. The soldiers were losing courage.

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King Rama summoned Bharata and discussed the situation with him. The King wanted Bharata to take charge of the battle.

Bharata looked serious. He softly said, "The defeats we suffer just don't make sense. It is like some curse working against us. May be, what we have done to sister Sita...."

It hurt Rama. He cut in, "Bharata! Are you afraid of battle? If it is so you can sit by Yajna fire and I will take care of the battle field. Am I fated to slay two kids?"

Bharata felt ashamed and said quickly, "Oh! Forgive me, O King! It would be a matter of shame for me if you go to the battle while I sit idling before the fire. I will go and bring those offending boys as prisoners."

"Right. Take the valiant Hanumana and his monkey force with you."

"As you wish," said Bharata and departed.

He contacted Hanumana and conveyed to him the wish of King Rama.

He spoke, "Brother Hanumana! Prepare your monkey force for war. We won't trouble the king Sugreeva. He is our honoured guest. But we can use his army. Meanwhile, I will also get ready."

"As you say, Brother," Hanumana said.

A short time later, Bharata and Hanumana set out for the battle ground along with their respective armies.

Their march raised great clouds of dust and the air was trembling with rumbling sounds.

Bharata and Hanumana in Fray

Lava saw from a distance the chariots of Bharata coming along with brown waves of monkeys coming through trees.

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Lava remarked, "Brother, This time a huge army is coming to deal with us. I think it is King Rama's famed monkey force. They say that this force defeated the demon king Ravana. We should make monkeys out of them."

"The idea is not bad. I would like to take few of those monkeys to the Goddess of the Forests and put up a monkey show to entertain her."

"We shall see. Let them come closer."

The twins readied their bows and arrows.

As soon as the monkey soldiers entered the battle field, the arrows shot by Lava and Kusha rained on them. The monkeys fell in heaps.

Meanwhile, Bharata's army had also launched attacks.

But it was not doing any damage to the twins. Bharata was chagrined to see the destruction of his force.

Hanumana stood silently watching the boys amused.

The monkey force had disintegrated. Bharata said to Hanumana, "Big Brother! The boys are quite fierce fighters. But they are merely kids. I can't make myself hit them hard. You must help. Take them prisoners with your might. They have destroyed your monkey force. May be, you won't hesitate in getting tough."

On Bharata's egging, Hanumana twirled his mighty mace and in a giant leap landed in front of the twins. They expertly evaded Hanumana's mace blows and counter attacked fiercely with punches and kicks. One of them drove out Hanumana with his arrows.

This greatly upset Bharata. He picked one of his deadly arrows and targetted Kusha. Kusha fell down and lost consciousness.

This made Lava pick out one of his powerful force arrows

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to target Bharata. It hit Bharata in the chest. He fell back and rolled down in his chariot. Bharata had fainted.

Lava pulled out the arrow from the chest of his brother. He caressed the wound invoking the name of guru Valmiki and the mother, Goddess of the Forests. Again, it worked like magic, the wound healed instantly and Kusha got up in full health and vigour.

Rama Versus Lava & Kusha

Bharata's failure and the destruction of the monkey force deeply pained King Rama. Now there was no alternative left except to take the battle field himself. Rama's force was getting discredited and Ashwamedha Yajna was becoming a matter of shame instead of pride. He left the Yajna to guru Vashishta's care and with his blessing, set out for war with a very large army. And with him, were statwarts like king Vibhishana, king Sugreeva, other friendly or subordinate kings and their armies. The people were wondering why so large armies were needed to tackle a couple of the tribal boys. Was the destiny enacting some mysterious drama?

The situation at the battle field was alarming. His brothers and his mighty warriors lay unconscious or seriously wounded. Dead soldiers were lying all around. Ashwamedha Horse stood impatiently neighing with some fright, tied to a tree. And nearby stood, two handsome twins in sage attires.

The sight of the boys aroused some sympathy in King Rama. His heart wanted to cuddle the kids. He called the boys to him and spoke. "O sage kids! Who are you? Who are your parents? Did you really vanquish all my warriors in fair battle?"

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"Listen, King. My name is Kusha, and this is my brother Lava. Our mother is Goddess of Forests. She is the daughter of the king Janaka of Mithila. Sage Valmiki is our God father. About our real father or lineage, we know nothing."

King Rama stood stunned to know that the twins were his own blood. He stared at them without blinking his eyes.

Kusha said, "King! Pick up your arms if you want to free your horse. Or go back to your Ayodhya with your army. We will let you go unharmed."

King Rama thought, "So, destiny has staged this drama with some purpose. I must quietly accept the will of the fate and do my duty." He picked up his bow. Lava and Kusha were already set for the battle. The arrows flew. But Rama did not target the boys. He was just content to cutting down the arrows coming at him. It surprised the twins, but they did not stop their charges. Lava and Kusha continued raining arrows at Rama. Rama just defended. This greatly puzzled Rama's army. Everyone wondered why King Rama was not punishing the offending boys.

Hanumana as Prisoner

The battle was turning into a farce. Hanumana watched it in surpirse. He wondered, why King Rama was hesitating to attack the minor boys? To set things right, he jumped into the fray with his mace.

This intrusion offended Kusha who said, "O Big Monkey! You come back again? Looks that you think you are a big thing. Come on, wrestle with me!"

Lava rained arrows on Rama. Kusha battled with Hanumana in wrestling bout. In a short time Kusha had grounded Hanumana and his legs and arms were bound by

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pieces of ropes.

"What do we do with this monkey, Lava?"

"Brother! Take it to the Goddess of the Forests. She will be pleased."

"Right. It is about dusk time. End of the war for the day. Let's go."

The twins departed with Hanumana as their catch of the day.

Meanwhile, with the sunset, Rama too ordered stoppage of the war activities and asked for the treatment of the wounded soldiers including his brothers.

The twins tied Hanumana with a wooden pillar outside their hut and went in to tell their mother, "Goddess of the Forest! We have brought an interesting thing for you."

"Where? And what is it?"

"It is outside there."

Sita came out to see.

As soon as she saw Hanumana as captive, she felt a chill. A puzzled look came on her face. Hanumana felt embarrassed. His face was filled with joy to see Sita again after such a long time. Through a devoted gaze he paid silent obeisance to Mother Sita.

He spoke in choked vocie, "Mother! Your sons have captured the Ashwamedha Horse of King Rama. It resulted in a war in which your divine sons have vanquished your brothers-in-law Bharata, Laxmana and Shatrughana. They are lying unconscious. When the battle was on with Lord Rama, they succeeded in taking me prisoner and brought me here to this treatment you see,"

The realisation of the situation shocked Sita. She ordered her sons to free Hanumana at once. The reaction of Sita

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conveyed to Lava and Kusha that they had done something wrong or naughty. After untying Hanumana they slipped away to stay away from the mother's sight. Sita rushed to the hut of sage Valmiki and explained the situation to him and queried, "Now, what is going to happen.

O Sage? What is happening is gravely wrong. A war between father and sons is no good."

"I know, daughter," the sage calmly said.

"You know and sit here letting it happen?"

"Yes. And stop worrying. When the time comes everything will get sorted out. The destiny is making it all happen."

"I don't understand, O Sage. I am getting a very bad feeling about what has happened to my brothers-in-laws. It is developing into a family war and my own sons are involved."

Sita had become very pensive and grave.

"Your sons have done nothing wrong, Sita. They are doing what naturally comes to them. They are the sons of warrior and they are making war. Simple." Sage Valmiki tried to put her at ease.

"Our Lava and Kusha have done no wrong. They fancied the horse and caught it. By chance it happened to be Ashwamedha Horse. By challenging warriors of Ayodhya they are merely giving their own introduction of being the latest warriors of Sun dynasty. Surrendering the horse without a fight would have been a cowardly act. But don't worry I will intervene tomorrow."

Sita returned to her hut after getting assured. The next morning, the twins again took charge of the battle positions and the fight began.

Lava said to King Rama, "King! If you are not serious

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about this battle you should return to your Ayodhya. Or stop playing games with us to appear to be a kind king. It is a war, not your court drama. Take this one."

Lava put one of his special arrows and shot it at Rama after chanting some *mantra*.

Rama again cut it down.

King Rama announced, "Obstinate and adamant boys! You are right that I have been playing child games with you in the hope that you would come to your senses. But it appears that you are determined to continue to trouble us and mar our Ashwamedha Yajna. For the honour of Ashwamedha I must punish you even if it means slaying minor boys. If the destiny wants it, so be it," with these words he put his deadliest weapon to the string to shoot.

Sage Valmiki Intervenes

"Hold it, O Lord!" sage Valmiki had come there running before King Rama could release his weapon. He said, "Send your arrow in some other direction or it would be a disaster!"

"What disaster?" King Rama asked.

Sage Valmiki blessed him and informed, "Lava and Kusha are your own sons, O Lord Rama."

"What? Are they my sons?" he put on an act of surprise. Meanwhile, Hanumana swayed in happiness.

"That is right, O Lord." Sage Valmiki narrated the entire sequence of events that had happened after Laxmana had abandoned Sita in the forest years ago, Then, he took oath to assure everyone of the truth of what he had said and added, "King Rama! They are your sons. There is no doubt about it. Accept them and discharge your duties as their father."

Sage Valmiki summoned the twins to him and declared,

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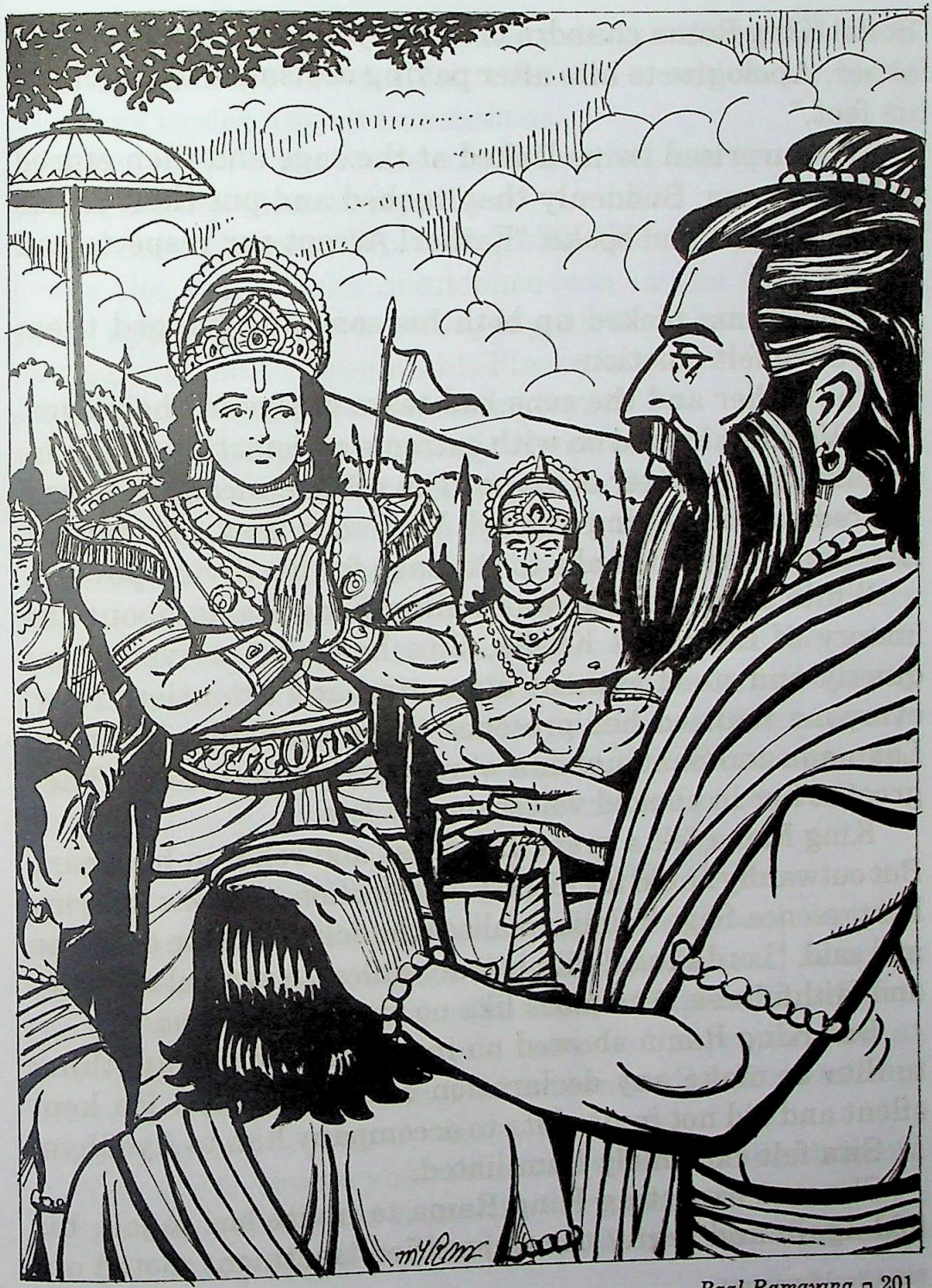

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"Sons! King Rama chandra of Ayodhya you see here, is your father. Apologize to him after paying obeisance by touching his feet."

The surprised twins looked at the sage and then stared at King Rama. Suddenly they rushed and put their heads to Rama's feet and spoke, "Father! Accept our respects and forgive us."

King Rama picked up both his sons and hugged them with deep felt emotion.

The father and the sons had tears of joys in their eyes. Sage Valmiki looked on with extreme satisfaction. Than he sprinkled holy water of his bowl on all the unconscious and injured warriors lying around. Very soon they got revived. Everyone prayed thanks to the sage for his divine powers.

While sage Valmiki was telling King Rama about the history of Lava and Kusha, Sita had also arrived there quietly and stood without attracting any attention. Now, everyone realised her presence there suddenly. Bharata, Laxmana and Shatrughana were overjoyed to see her. They greeted her in choked voices one by one.

King Rama felt a great happiness and relief in his heart. But outwardly he did not display any emotions. He was ignoring her presence. Sage Valmiki realised the delicacy of the situation and said, "Lord Rama! Sita is true, sinless, a symbol of purity and faithfulness. And pious like no woman ever was."

But King Rama showed no inclination to say anything to Sita or make any declaration concerning her. He kept silent and did not invite Sita to accompany him to Ayodhya.

Sita felt extremely humiliated.

She was expecting King Rama to invite her to join his fold again and regret the unjustified treatment meted out

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to her. But she was not to get any justice or fair treatment. At that moment she decided that she would never go to Ayodhya under any circumstances.

After some time, Rama asked Laxmana to request Sita to accompany them to Ayodhya.

Laxmana went to Sita and spoke, "Honourable Mother! I was the sinner who abandoned you in the forest some years ago. Ever since a feeling of guilt and shame had been tormenting me day and night. Please forgive me and let me escort you to Ayodhya to redeem myself."

King Rama's acts of talking to her through a third person was an indirect insult to Sita. So she felt. And others too felt it. Rama's behaviour had puzzled the brothers too.

Sita said to Laxmana, "My dear brother Laxmana! It was no fault of yours to desert me in the jungle. You were merely acting for your King being a servant of the court. One who really disowned me is still not certain about my innocence. Or he does not want to admit it for fear of public opinion. How can I return to Ayodhya and on what ground? Now, only earth shall allow my return to her bosom."

Mother Earth accepts Sita

After that, Sita called her sons and said, "Sons! Go with your father. Always respect him and be obedient. Keep up the family traditions and the dynastic principles. Your father is a king. His primary duty is towards his people even at the cost of personal feelings or interests. Don't ever stand in the way of his primary duty.

You are to severe your relations with your mother and to go your father's fold from this very moment."

At the very thought of separation from the mother made

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the boys cling to their mother and weep.

Sage Valmiki separated them from Sita and formally handed them over to King Rama. Then, Sita turned and walked towards the river Saryu.

No one dared to ask anything from her, so grim she was.

Sage Valmiki, perhaps guessed her move. He watched silently.

On the river bank, Sita prayed with folded hands, "Mother Earth! I never entertained any idea about any man except my husband Rama. If my statement is true to every word I said, give me refuge in you bosom."

The air trembled.

The truth echoed out in all the directions. The coulds thundered in support. The lightnings flashed their agreement. The earth shook to toss away if any doubts remained. Waves rose up in consent.

The people watched with baited breath in frozen state.

With a tremor the earth split beneath Sita's feet, opening up a bottomless trench to allow her in.

"Mother! Oh Mother!" Lava and Kusha screamed as they saw their mother falling into the split earth.

King Rama, Valmiki, Bharata, Laxmana, Shatrughana and Hanumana stood utterly stunned and overawed.

A divine voice announced, "Great are you, O Sita! Your character was as pious as the water of holy Ganga. The air will carry the fragrance of the glory of your sacrifices for ever and ever."

Lava & Kusha in Ayodhya

The earthing of Sita plunged everyone in grief. Bharata, Laxmana and Shatrughana were heart broken but they had

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to appear calm to give courage to the sons of Sita. Rama too was sad. A part of him was getting weighed down by a feeling of guilt. Sage Valmiki was trying his best to console everyone especially the orphanned Lava and Kusha.

After mourning the departure of Sita, all returned to Ayodhya along with Ashwamedha Horse.

The sad end of Sita had made the gloom descend on Ayodhya. The citizens grieved over it. But the discovery of Lava and Kusha was heartening news. Thus, the people suffrered mixed feelings. Lava and Kusha received a graceful welcome.

King Rama reached at the Yajna venue accompanied by his sons, brothers, guest kings and warriors. Yajna was consumated ceremoniously with the final worship of the Ashwamedha Horse. The priests were given their due rewards and the guest kings were seen off with ample and valuable gifts.

Sages departed after blessing the King and his brothers. Rama returned to his palace with his sons.

Lord Rama's heart remained heavy with sadnesss.

Ashwamedha had made him invincible King Rama and he busied himself in public works and leading a religious life.

He ruled the world for eleven thousand years from the city of Ayodhya. During this time peace reigned. Prosperity spread. The feeling of brotherhood took roots. Famines and other natural calamities stayed away. Wars had become unnececessary exercise.

Lord Rama had every reason to feel satisfied and glorious. But something always felt missing. The absence of Sita acted as a damper. Her memory kept haunting him.

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He wished to leave the earth and go back to his heavenly abode.

In the heavens, Lord Vishnu learnt about his wish and he summoned Dharamraja, the god of death.

Dharmraja, at once appeared accompanied by footloose divine sage, Narada. Narada spoke, "Narayana! Narayana! Narada pays his obeisance to your lotus like feet."

Lord Vishnu smiled and remarked, "Narada! We did not summon you."

"Lord! An incorrigible devotee does not require any summons to force his presence on the Lord. We are immune from the desease of formalities. We have the divine right to stick to our Lord like Leeches whenever we feel like. And we know that you are sending the god of death, Dharmraja to get back your own incarnation Rama from the earth. At such an important occasion, I am always the fly on the wall."

Lord Vishnu said to Dharmraja, "Narrada is correct. My role as Rama on the earth has come to an end. You must bring my Rama form back with due procedure. You were summoned for this very purpose."

"As your Lord wishes," Dharmraja bowed his head.

And then, he transcended to earth.

But he faced a problem, how to tell Rama, the superman supreme, the paragon of virtue and righteousness, the model of high values and truthfulness, the spirit of sacrifice and service, that his time on the earth was over and he had to go.

Dharmraja, in the guise of a *Brahmin* priest showed himself in Ayodhya.

Lord Rama recognised him at once and spoke, "Welcome Dharmraja! I have been waiting for you. Please say, how

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and when do we depart?"

"Lord! I will explain everything, But first make sure that our conversation remains between us only."

Rama gave a high throne to Dharmraja to get seated and then instructed to Laxmana, "Laxmana! I want to talk to the holy priest privately on some urgent personal matter. Stand guard at the door. Without our permission no one is to be allowed in. Death will be the punishment if you fail in this duty."

"Shall be done, O Lord," Laxmana assured. He closed the door and stood outside to guard.

Only a little time had passed when the fiery sage, Durvasa, known in all the worlds for his raging anger, arrived. He had come to meet Rama. He was moving towards the door when Laxmana blocked his passage and said, "Excuse me, O Sage! You shall have to wait to see Lord Rama."

It sparked the anger of Durvasa. He turned dark with rage and thundered, "Prince! How dare your stop me? Don't you know my ire? If you don't move aside I shall turn your Ayodhya in a heap of ash. And I will put a dreadful curse on you."

But Laxmana was not impressed. He did not give the fiery saint the way. Durvasa had never been confronted like this. His face turned black as a coal and his eyes flashed red. His body was shaking and he spat out." Laxmana! Your days on this earth are finished. I put a curse on you that you shall go to heaven alive and leave this earth."

"As you order, O Lord," Laxmana accepted the death sentence with folded hands and bowed head.

And Durvasha pushed open the door and went in. The

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appearance of the famed sage, Durvasa greatly puzzled and annoyed Rama. But the sage marched to him in fiery mood and rebuked, "Rama! Do elders and sages now get such respectless treatment in your reign?"

Sage Durvasa had undertaken a thousand year fast. And today was the last day of his fast. Rama cooled down the anger of the sage with great difficulty and got him seated. Then he learnt the purpose of the visit of the sage. Durvasa was feted with great many delicacies and good food. Afterwards Rama asked, "O Sage! How did Laxmana allow you to enter my chamber?"

"That idiot wouldn't allow me in. So, I cursed him with live departure to heaven from this world." The talk of curse made Dharmraja smile but it gave immense pain to Rama. He moaned, "O Sage! What have you done? Why did you have to do it? O God! The curse has nullified the credit you had earned through 1000 year fast. What a tragedy!"

This realisation shocked the sage. He went away ashamed. After Durvasa's departure, Dharmraja said, "So, O Pious One! I beg your leave. We shall meet at the place and the time agreed upon."

Rama bade good bye to Dharmraja. Then Laxmana entered the chamber and spoke, "O Invincible King! I have failed in my assigned duty. Kindly honour your word by sentencing me to death."

Laxmana's admission caused great anguish to Rama but he maintained his royal dignity and announced, "Dear Laxmana! You certainly have committed a major offence in not carrying out my express orders. Hence, I disown you."

After receiving the judgement, Laxmana departed from there. The news of the punishment to Laxmana spread

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throughout the palace and all over the city of Ayodhya. Thousands of anguished citizens ran towards the palace and the royal court to know about the details. No one knew why King Rama had passed such gruesom sentence on Laxmana. He had disowned his younger brother who was so devoted to him.

Meanwhile, Laxmana left the palace and quietly marched towards the river Saryu followed by thousands of grieving citizens.

On the Saryu bank, he took water in the cup of his hand and tasted it. Then he sat down in yoga posture, deactivated sensory organs and froze his body to release his soul from physical bondages. Instantly the Lord of the heavens, Indra descended there with his divine craft. The agents of the god of the death, Dharmraja, put Laxmana's dead body in Indra's craft and the party departed for heavens. Rama, Bharata and Shatrughana saw the scene from the royal balcony of their palace. The brothers sat down in mourning.

After Laxmana's departure, King Rama looked a lost soul and a forlorn figure. The world appeared an alien place to him. The very next day, he called a meeting of guru Vashishta, ministers, chieftans, court members and prominant citizens. Bharata and Shatrughana were also present. Rama announced, "Respected Guru and dear sirs, I want to pass on the crown to my valiant and capable younger brother, Bharata. You won't ever get more kind and more gentleman King than my Bharata. I wish to leave. The coronation be arranged as soon as possible. Time is running out for me. I will go the same way my dear Laxmana went."

This announcement shocked the assembled people.

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Bharata was crest fallen. He prayed with folded hands, "King Brother! Please don't banish me to the throne. I want nothing but staying with you. No kingdom or heaven can lure me. I shall go with you. Give the crown to brother Shatrughana."

Shatrughana protested, "No Brother, No! I don't want the throne. My throne is where my brothers Rama's feet rest. I shall also come with you. That is my final decision."

The unshakable reslove of his brothers forced Rama to allow them to follow him. He handed over Lava and Kusha to guru Vashishta and said, "O Lord! Now these boys and the Kingdom is in your care. Decide as your wisdom says. And please allow us to depart on our final journey."

With heavy heart, guru Vashishta announced, "Rama! I declare Kusha, the king designate of Ayodhya. And allow you and your brothers to depart You cease to be King from this moment."

Lord Rama and his brothers walked towards the river Saryu, followed by thousands of citizens who also wished to depart in their company.

On the river bank, Rama called Hanumana to him and spoke, "Son! You say nothing. But I know your pain. Sita blessed you to be immortal. So you will be."

"To me it is turning out to be a curse because it means separation from you, O Lord!" Hanumana moaned.

"No dear Hanumana! I will always be with you for I live in your heart. But you won't wander on this earth aimlessly. From this day, you will always be present wherever there is recitation of my story or enactment of drama related to me. You shall be people's protector from fear and you will sing praises of my name."

"As you wish, O Lord," Hanumana had found a holy

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mission.

Then, Rama performed the worship of Lord Shiva along with his brothers. After that, Rama, Bharata and Shatrughana entered the waters of the holy Saryu. Thousands of others followed them.

Heaven's announced," O Lord! You and your brothers may enter any heavenly order you wish."

Lord Rama entered the water to some depth and sat down submerged to liberate his soul.

His soul departed for the domain of Lord Vishnu.

Bharata and Shatrughana followed their brother .

And all others who liberated their souls went to the choice heavenly abodes.

For Hanumana, immortality just means prayer to Rama and Sita stretching into infinity. He is present in some form or other where there is Ramayana being recited or Ramalila being enacted.

This story of Rama is holier than the holy waters of Ganga. Its study brings peace to mind and prosperity to life. It inspires one to tread the path of truthfulness, kindness, sacrifice, compassion, mercy, valour, courage and justice which will ultimately lead to the salvation.

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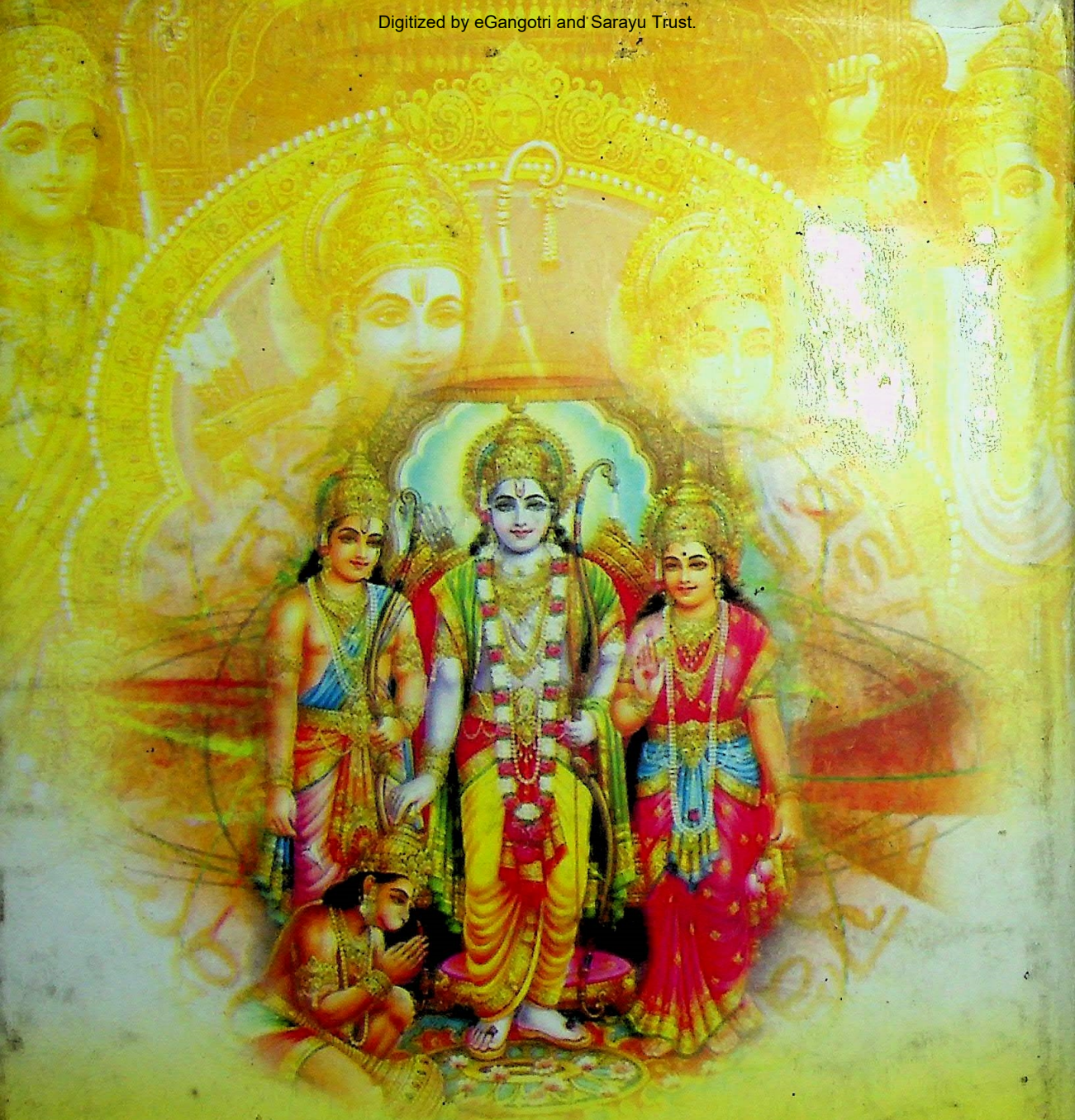

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